TRANSLATING GRAHAM SWIFT'S *LAST ORDERS* – SOME OF LENNY TATE'S STRIKING OF CHORDS

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Abstract: This research is based on a chapter from Graham Swift's novel Last Orders and it confronts the original English text with a Romanian translation. Starting from general issues of style and register, we dwell on certain aspects of the translated text, minding at the same time the principles of translation. We submit to attention problematic instances of the Romanian version of the text, sometimes offering alternatives which are deemed more appropriate, bringing contextual arguments for the claims. In this process, we also take into account the way a good translation needs to faithfully render, in the target language, the personalities of the characters, as well as the subtleties of meaning detectable in their discourse.

Keywords: translation, translation principle, inference, identity, context

Foreword

This paper seeks to analyze a section from the novel *Last Orders* by the British writer Graham Swift, taking into account issues regarding its language and translation into Romanian. The above-mentioned fragment is chapter sixteen in the novel, where the narrator is the character Lenny Tate. The Romanian translation we are looking at belongs to Petru Creția and Cristina Poenaru and it appeared with the Univers publishing house in Bucharest in 1999.

We have chosen Graham Swift because it is one of the finest contemporary writers in England, due mainly to his witty language and ability to create subtlety of meaning in the most ordinary of individuals, who apparently neither possess, at first glance, anything special, nor would they be capable of extreme profundity of spirit. Nevertheless, it is precisely in the most mundane of lives that significant drama may take place, perhaps specifically triggered by the humdrum aspect of one's existence. The monotony of one's life hides, in the case of Swift's characters, unaccomplished goals, regrets for would-be developments in their lives that never get to take place, for one reason or the other – ill luck, lack of courage or initiative, social imposition that dictates making the wise choice. It is the case of Lenny Tate, a boxer *manqué*. In the novel, he is not the only one in the situation of having failed in a desired career. The group that make up his friends, the characters belonging to the elderly generation, are almost all something other than their preference: Jack (now deceased) wanted to be a doctor, but ended up a butcher; Ray would have liked to be a jockey, but he is a bookkeeper; Vic dreamed of going away at sea as a captain, but ended up activating in a business he could not go bankrupt in – undertaking etc. The characters' frustrations concerning their paths in life make them introverts who think a lot to themselves, and do that with a special passion and lyricism, despite being men (and, perhaps, because of that, less prone to introspection, according, at least, to stereotypes across history).

The situation we have described makes room for witty interior monologues. We have selected one of Lenny's in particular, as in the story he is hinted at as a "stirrer" (Swift 1997: 7), an individual who likes punching the others not only as a prize fighter, but also

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figuratively, and who thus keeps "punching" lines, if we can see through the pun. He is a bully in relating to his peers, and, due to this quality, a symbolical engine for the story. His aggressiveness provokes responses from the others through which we get to know them as characters. His bullying constructs identities, reveals relationships, introduces through verbosity new pieces of information, makes points, spells out the truth making it clearer.

Another reason for picking out *Last Orders* from among Graham Swift's novels to analyze from a translation studies perspective is the richness of linguistic issues in the characters' vocabulary. The style is extremely offering and expressive, as it is the Southern London dialect filled with colloquialisms and colorful terms, as we will see later.

We shall resort to concepts from the theory of translation to help pinpoint some aspects of the text under analysis. As any translation minds culture and context, we also refer to aspects of identity construction and studies; these are part of cultural studies at large, which makes this endeavor intertextual.

General stylistic issues

Before passing on to the translation as such, we will look into the general feel of the text in order to get an idea about its atmosphere and the aspects that make up the topic approached in this fragment.

First, we will refer to what happens in the text *per se*. Vince Dodds, a mature man, returns from the army service to Bermondsey and enters the pub called the Coach and Horses, the old meeting place of a group of friends that reunites members from two generations. Vince belongs to the younger generation, but, as he enters the locale, the first group member he meets is Lenny, now an elderly man. They start talking after Lenny accepts the drink offered by Vince, and old issues are rehashed in the mind of the former, along with his grudge against Vince, issues that we find out about from his interior monologue and comments. An insignificant, casual meeting and an apparently inconsequential situation, such as having a drink with someone you see after a long time in a pub, hides inner struggles. A monotonous, polite and somewhat distant and impersonal dialogue covers hidden tensions and a passionate attitude in relation to events that both characters have experienced.

The register is a Southern English colloquial one, characterized by elements that challenge the translator, because it is filled with ellipses, disagreements between subject and verb and idioms. To its oral, spoken quality that dares the translator, we can add the difficulty it raises due to its artfully shrewd nature, rich with inferences that need to be retrieved in the target language. Another challenge that it represents for translation is the observance of the principle of fluency or accuracy, due to the absence of connectors and its elliptical sentences. A further potential problem may be the fact that fluency could at times come in stark contrast, or go against the principle of fidelity or accuracy which would determine the translator to preserve the laconic feel of the original text.

Lenny and Vince's loud and silent confrontation

When Vince enters the Coach and Horses, we are told that he "parks himself on a stool" there (*Ibidem*: 66). The Romanian version employs the verb "*se instalează*", which is not incorrect, but which loses a significant part of meaning and "equivalence" (Ionescu 2003: 43) at the "pragmatic level" (*Ibidem*: 44) of the text. Let us see why it is important to preserve this association with cars in the target text as well. On the one hand, the name of the pub, The Coach and Horses, has a special cultural significance in relation with the generation of the

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welfare state, who lived from static small businesses, who were more connected to the community network and consequently less flexible or prone to movement, or, otherwise, figuratively, to change. However, some of the representatives of this generation would have liked to choose differently from their parents, and, instead of conforming to a safe, static and monotonous existence, to live their dream (see the characters mentioned in the introduction). Most of the careers *manqués* that they would have liked to pursue, or hobbies that they would have enjoyed having are connected with or presuppose movement and getting away from the fixed place where they lead their lives: going on trips in a camper or being a jockey (Ray), voyaging at sea (Vic), boxing, which meant traveling (Lenny). Even the leitmotif and central issue at stake in the novel is a journey to fulfil Jack Dodds' last wish, of having his ashes scattered from the Margate pier. The actual movements in the story prefigure the desire to lead a more adventurous and interesting life, where one is one's own master by staying true to what one dreams of, and the regret of not doing so. They are also a *figura* for taking distance from the centre, in all possible senses of the phrase: physically; ideologically, as the novel anticipates the post-Thatcherite individualism already visible among the members of the young generation in their attitudes to life; in the style of novel-writing, by choosing a marginal type of discourse instead of the mainstream, and by digressing a lot.

The second allusion that is lost by losing the connection with cars in the use of the verb "*se instalează*" in the target language is to Vince's occupation and lifestyle. He runs a showroom (or garage, as his fellow friends call it) where he repairs and reconditions cars. To him, cars are everything, as he states himself, a way of life: "A good motor is a comfort and companion and an asset"; "it's the combination of man and motor, it's the intercombustion. A motor aint nothing without a man […] And sometimes a man aint nothing without a motor" (Swift 1997: 71). Unlike the older generation, he has pursued his dream. He refused to take over the family business (Jack Dodds' butchery), unlike most, who would have (and many before him did), and as tradition imposed. Due to his identification with the car, or "motorvation" (*Ibidem*), it would make sense to use a term associated with cars in order to describe an action that he performs, i.e. "park". Due to all the arguments above, it is my contention that we could preserve the term "*parchează*" in Romanian (perhaps in inverted commas), despite its colloquialism, which would not, after all, be in any conflict with the already informal and colloquial overall note of the English text.

The next bit of discussion concerns the use of the Romanian "*zice, rece ca o zi de iarnă: „Ce mai face Sally?"*" (Swift 1999: 61) for "he says, cool as Christmas, 'How's Sally?'" (Swift 1997: 66). There are two main semantic components in the English version that should be present in the target language as well: the idea of distance taken from the other, of lack of emotion; the notion of the speaker's self-composure and self-confidence verging on impudence. There is also the implication of Vince having abandoned Sally and parted with her in terms other than the best, after she had fallen in love with him. He made her fall in love mainly out of spite, to get revenge for being made to ride in the back of Dodds' meat van in his childhood, while she rode in the front with his adoptive parents, during their trips to the seaside. This ramified implication is extremely important for us in order to understand the causal relations between events, the logic of the characters' actions, feelings and words, and their identity profile. It also clarifies the tense atmosphere between Vince and Sally's father, Lenny.

As far as the translation is concerned, the Romanian "*rece*" catches rather the idea of lack of feeling and less or none of the notion of Vince's disrespectful composure, and the problem is that this latter component is perhaps prevalent, holding a priority in the conveyed meaning. This conjecture is supported by Lenny's reaction, who, despite wondering himself whether Vince's attitude is "bare-faced cheek" or "some dumb part of him" (*Ibidem*), is somewhat outraged, tending to assign it to insolence. Since the impertinence seems to be the

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most important semantic ingredient, a potential Romanian equivalent such as *mai stăpân pe el ca niciodată* would render this essence better. However, what would be gained in relevance, according to the principle of relevance or the "equivalent effect" (Ionescu 2003: 47-9), would be lost in fidelity/accuracy. Accuracy may be problematic in a translation precisely because "there may be similar structures with different uses and different connotations" (*Ibidem*: 43), as in our case, in which the connotations in Romanian are incomplete in comparison with those obtained in English. The word "cool" has more meanings than "*rece*". It seems that in every case the translation loses something of the foreign-language syntagm that is relatively important to the overall interpretation, the question remaining to choose one's loss.

When Lenny the narrator says "now here he was to ask for my daughter" (Swift 1997: 66), he does not mean "*cerîndu-mi fata*" (Swift 1999: 61). The breach in fidelity and relevance of meaning resides in picking the wrong interpretation, which in this case is neither asking for a meeting with Sally, nor asking Sally's hand in marriage from Vince's part, as she is already married and Vince has never had such intentions. He merely wants to know how she is doing. Moreover, taking the larger context into account, the question may well be just social theatrics, a way to begin a conversation, with no real feeling or interest for the young woman. Hence, the translation should reflect the simple, first meaning of the verb to ask, instead of considering it as part of a phrase: *întrebând de*.

We should also consider two bits of translation in the next paragraph in the story: "you'd think by the way Jack behaves that Vince had had a change of heart, he'd gone and seen the error of his ways" (Swift 1997: 66), translated as "*după felul în care se purta Jack îţi venea a crede că Vince s-a schimbat, a făcut el ce-a făcut şi şi-a dat seama de greşeală*" (Swift 1999: 61). To have "a change of heart" means to "change your opinion or the way you feel about something", according to the Cambridge dictionary (http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/british/change-of-heart), so not to change *per se*, which means we could translate the English idiom by *s-a răzgândit*. What is more, "the error of his ways" does not imply simply one mistake, if not a multitude of them, so a more faithful translation would be *și-a dat seama că o luase pe căi greșite*, since Vince's errors are many: he did not recognize the authority of his father and Jack felt that Vince was not paying him due respect; he did not want to take over the family business and become a butcher; he disgraced Sally.

A real problem is the translation of the term "camper van" or "camper" by "*câmpenii*", on a number of occasions in the chapter, when in fact the references are to Ray's vehicle. This error amounts to a breach of the principles of equivalence and fidelity. The term that should have been employed is either *rulotă*, or simply the borrowing *camper*. The latter solution, of a borrowing, is nevertheless described as incongruous by Ionescu, a "not always […] felicitous strategy", in the context in which Romanian is lately taken by assault with foreign words (Ionescu 2003: 41). Here, no case of non-lexicalization (*Ibidem*) could be invoked, since we have a Romanian equivalent that retrieves indeed fully the meaning of the English term, so there is no reason to avoid its use.

Vince uses Ray's yard to park the vehicles he is working on. The phrase "tinkering with the engine" (Swift 1997: 67) has been translated as "*trebăluind la motorul lui*" (Swift 1999: 62), but a better equivalence would have been achieved, in my opinion, with the Romanian *meșterind*. "Tinkering" has the connotations of a metallic sound, sharing some semantic content with the concepts of "tin" and "tinker", and this hue of meaning is unfortunately lost in both Romanian variants. However, it is my contention that *meșterind* is better than "*trebăluind*" because it contains the semnantic feature [+repair] and is more suitable for a context that involves technology (like ours), whereas the second term would be more appropriate for a situation that involves running an errand or doing a chore.

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The above-mentioned distinction entails only a relatively small difference in meaning, which nevertheless counts, if not for the overall feel of the text, which in this case is not affected, at least for the principle of fidelity. The next sentence that we are going to address is "'You can't kid yourself any longer'" (Swift 1997: 67), translated as "*Nu te mai poţi înşela*" (Swift 1999: 62), which sacrifices meaning for the sake of economy. Even the principle of economy states that the translator should find "the *best* target 'shortcut'" (Ionescu 2003: 45) (my Italics), so, in any event, the integrity of the meaning should remain paramount. In Romanian, *a se înșela* as an intransitive verb means to be mistaken in a matter of some kind, rather than to delude oneself, or to fool oneself into believing something, which is the case here. In order to catch this layer of meaning, which is present in our context and actually essential to it, a specification needs to be made, in case we decided to preserve the verb "*înșela*", by adding "*singur*", in order to recuperate the illocution. However, other suggestions for the translation of the whole phrase would be *Nu te mai amăgi*/*Nu te mai păcăli singur*, the first one capturing the best the intention present in the English phrasing.

Referring to Vince's love of cars and "tinkering" on them all day long, and to the fact that his perseverance in this activity clearly indicates he means it to be more than just a hobby, and that it has turned into a job, Lenny says: "he ain't just doing it for the love of it" (Swift 1997: 67). The translation "*dar n-o face aşa, de drag*" (Swift 1999: 62) is ambiguous. Given the context, the fact that the narrator has mentioned overtly that to Vince fixing cars is not just a hobby, we could pick up the inference correctly – this being that Vince does not repair cars *only* for pleasure. However, the Romanian phrase may also be understood as: Vince does not repair cars for pleasure, but for an ulterior motive, for other benefits that would be prioritized over sheer pleasure, which is not the intended meaning. The disambiguation can be achieved by the use of *doar*: "*dar n-o face doar aşa, de drag*", which would remind and reinforce the correct interpretation: he does that for pleasure first and foremost, but indeed not only for pleasure. The use of *doar* is also supported by the fact that its English equivalent, "just", is present in the original text.

Lenny remembers a piece of conversation he had with Jack regarding Vince and his life choices. Jack blamed Ray for renting his courtyard to Vince, thus helping the latter to avoid the traditional duty of becoming a butcher like his adoptive father, and indulging his car showroom dream instead. In Ray's defense, and suggesting that Ray may have needed the money, and is perhaps not to be blamed for what Vince did, since Vince is mature enough to bear the responsibility of his own actions, Lenny replied to Jack: "But Ray's got troubles of his own, aint he?" (Swift 1997: 67), translated as "*Numai că Ray are necazurile lui personale, nu vezi?*" (Swift 1999: 62). The translation I suggest would be *Dar are și Ray problemele lui, nu?* This version suggests the interpretation above, the intention of absolving him of any guilt related to having helped Vince, whereas the translation we have renders the impression that there would be other, ulterior, hidden reasons why Ray would have helped Vince, which is not the case here (except, perhaps, a shared passion for cars and being on the road). Secondly, the official translation also gives the impression that the speaker would intend to steer the conversation towards Ray and his troubles, and get into the subject more, which is again not the case. On the contrary, Lenny means to make Jack figure out what he means with his words without stating it upfront. Lenny appeals to Jack's common sense, is diplomatic and wants to let the old man realize the truth without being too pushy, which he would have been, had he been more direct in defending Ray. Lenny knows that taking Ray's part in too many words and too straightforwardly might have stirred Jack's ego and made him be more adamant in placing the blame on Ray. Thirdly, the translation I offer is in conformity with the principle of economy, as it is shorter without losing the meaning.

Jack means to make Vince get closer to him and tries to gain his graces by "bringing" his adopted son a young woman, Mandy, as a sort of bribe and personal toy. Mandy has run

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away from home, Jack stumbles upon her and, after giving her a free meal at Bernie's, takes her under his roof, without asking his wife Amy's permission. That is why Lenny says Jack "goes one step further" (Swift 1997: 67) than merely treating the young woman to a wholesome breakfast (which would not be considered odd). The implication is that perhaps Jack goes a bit too far with the invitation, an idea that is reinforced by Lenny's immediate comment "you'd think Amy might've had a thing or two to say about it" (*Ibidem*).

For these reasons, the translation "*face un pas mai mult*" could be improved by *duce/împinge lucrurile şi mai departe*. The authors of the translation may have felt that the phrasing they chose was more faithful to the original, as it preserves the idea of taking a step, of walking. However, in Romanian this construction is used more when the target or "destination" is mentioned, in a context of the type *a face un pas către* … , or when it has been mentioned shortly before and is clearly graspable in one's mind. Also, it usually has a positive connotation, appearing in contexts in which the progression is an accomplishment. In our case, neither of the two features is present. If we were to preserve the original notion of "walk", or "physical advancement", but give it a negative connotation, as in our context, we could say something like *sare calul* or *întrece limita*. In this case, fidelity in translation could be sacrificed to capturing the pragmatic "implicature" – in Grice's terms (Grice 2004: 43-4) – of a gesture that represents a crossing of the line.

Still referring to the way Jack should have sent Mandy back home, Lenny says that in this way the man "would have […] saved himself some sniggers and some trouble" (Swift 1997: 67), translated as "*scuturîndu-se de nişte zîmbete cu înţeles şi de ceva necazuri*" (Swift 1999: 62). The Romanian verb "*scuturîndu-se*" usually implies getting rid of something physical, material. In our case, the implication in the context is not towards something physical, but to escaping the mockery of others. Consequently, a verb like *scutindu-se* would seem more appropriate, also since this verb is habitually correlated with a situation in which a person *can* do something to avoid unpleasant things (most commonly effort and ill feelings). We could say then that this verb is a better equivalent, at word level.

Once in the Dodds' home, Mandy tries to convince them not to tell her parents where she is, or, as Lenny puts it "she's begging them not to let on about her" (Swift 1997: 68). The translation we have, "*se roagă să n-o abandoneze*" (Swift 1999: 63) is not the equivalent of the phrasal verb "to let on", which means to reveal a secret, and which could find a less formal equivalent in the Romanian phrasing *îi imploră să n-o dea de gol*. Fidelity and equivalence are challenged again in the translation of Vince's words (imagined by Lenny in a would-be dialogue): "Thanks, Jack, now I'll start coming to Smithfield again. Seems like a good spot." (Swift 1997: 68) by "[…] *Pare să fie o chestie bună*" (Swift 1999: 63), as here "spot" refers to a place, area, namely Smithfield, not to the activity or process of coming to Smithfield.

The last bit that I would like to discuss is Lenny's answer to Vince's casual "How's Sally?", with ""She got married, didn't she?" (Swift 1997: 68), translated as "*Ce, nu ştii că s-a măritat?*" (Swift 1999: 63). First, we should try to understand the semantic and connotative content present in the original text in Lenny's answer. Taking into account Lenny's personality, of a bully, and the context, we can imagine that his tone is irritated and a bit aggressive. He feels attacked, because he knows his daughter has failed in life. The man she is married to is currently in prison and she is barely making ends meet. Lenny is ashamed of this situation and is especially reluctant to discuss it with Vince, since he hates Vince for having once seduced and abandoned Sally. However, at the same time, Lenny cannot help thinking that, with all his aversion for the young man, Vince would have probably made a better husband for Sally – he is quite handsome and will soon be well off as well. This realization and spite towards Vince for having left Sally are all the more painful and get rehashed at the moment they are having the conversation. Lenny knows that if the conversation unfolds and

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they get into details, he will have to confess Sally's misery to Vince and in this way admit shame and defeat, which is something that Lenny is not prepared to do. He feels the need to compensate for his pain and irritation by highlighting the apparently positive part in his daughter's life – the fact that she got married. The way he says it, using a tag, makes it look like an accomplishment. Moreover, in the reproachful tone, which we can infer from the context and from the use of the tag question at the end, there is the implication that Sally was good enough to be a wife to someone, and, implicitly, that Vince was a dishonorable man in failing to do the right thing and marry her himself. By his words, Lenny means to both boast with his daughter and belittle Vince.

The Romanian translation reveals the aggressiveness and reproach put forth by Lenny, but perhaps less his triumph and the need to be acknowledged a success (even if he does not really believe it to be a success, as he knows better). For the latter part, a translation like *S-a măritat, nu?!* would have probably served better. It would also fit with the principles of economy and fidelity better.

The colorful style in the chapter is well rendered by the choice of Romanian words and phrasing in the translation we are analyzing. The informality is retrieved by the use of unceremonious terms and words that are part of spoken language, such as: "*neobrăzare*", "*iacătă-l*", "*se pune pe treabă*", "*o nimereşte*", "*îţi venea a crede*" (*Ibidem*: 61), "*vasăzică*" (*Ibidem*: 62), "*ce învîrte el*", "*iat-o*", "*uite-i*" (*Ibidem*: 63), "*stă colea*", "*pe ici, pe colo*" (*Ibidem*: 64), of archaic forms like "*prăvălie*" (*Ibidem*: 61), as well as of contracted verbal forms: "*ce-i*" (*Ibidem*: 63), "*n-are*" (*Ibidem*: 64) etc. The high frequency of hypothetical constructions "*ai crede*", "*ar fi putut avea*", "*ai putea spune*", "*ai fi putut spune*" (*Ibidem*: 62) contributes to the oral character of the turns of the sentences, along with the subject ellipses. Even cursing and taboo words are sometimes used: "*al dracului de repede*" (*Ibidem*: 61), "*dracu' să-l ia*" (*Ibidem*: 63), "*afurisit deşert*" (*Ibidem*: 64). There are some bits that masterly illustrate the principle of fluency, which states that "the target text must "flow" both logically and stylistically" (Ionescu 2003: 46): "*Şi nici n-are mutră urîtă, mai mare păcatul, s-a împlinit frumos, îmi dau seama de ce îl lasă să-i calce în picioare, pentru că e oricînd gata să facă pe bietul-orfan, la o adică.*" (Swift 1999: 64)

Conclusions

In this paper, our intention has been to discuss some bits of translation in relation to implications made by the characters and to their identities. Also, we have probed into the conformity of the translated chapter relative to the principles of translation.

The text we have looked into is savory, for all the reasons mentioned at the beginning, but it also has numerous layers of meaning that need to be successfully transferred to the target language in translation, this being one of its challenges. What is required as well, both from the reader and the translator, is an ability to draw inferences and pick up implicatures. The capacity to do so may be hindered by the presence of ellipses in the structure of the sentences.

Also, the informality of the source text, along with its spoken quality require the use of uncomplicated words in the target language, but at the same time words that are expressive enough to contain the richness of meaning. These words do not generally belong to the basic vocabulary of the language, so the translator needs to know a wide range of terms, as well as of idioms. This quality reflects in the translation we have analyzed.

Translations need to take into account the personalities of the characters, trying to render these by creating, as much as possible, a style for each. In our case, Lenny's style, visible in his interior monologue, is quite blunt – up to being rough – thus bearing the mark of

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a bullying individual. This style has been quite accurately conveyed and recreated in Romanian, with appropriate words and phrasing.

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