# LYRICAL EXPRESSIVITY IN ROMANIAN AND THE ART OF TRANSLATION

**Ludmila BRANIŞTE, Associate Professor Ph.D.,**
**Oana Maria PETROVICI, Ph.D.,**
**„Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University of Iaşi**

*Abstract: The paper aims to discuss the interpretative and poetic potential of the Romanian language, recognized by translators from other literatures. Its lyrical expressivity and power of metaphor allow subtleties of thought and feeling to be transposed into other languages. In other words, its potential for „sensitive intercommunication" dismantles the common prejudice of the cultural impossibility in translation: t r a d u tt o r e-t r a d i t o r i, or treacherous translation. The analysis is based on texts by George Coşbuc (1866-1918), a Romanian poet.*

*Keywords: translation, lyrical expressivity, metaphor, meaning, atmosphere, echo*

In Romanian literature, George Coşbuc (1866-1918) is known for his sensitive poetry of feeling and nature, which ensured him a place in the literary canon of early 20th century. His status of researcher also brought him membership in the Romanian Academy in 1916. But his research is linked to a rich translation work he was committed to for many years.

His timing was right despite the fact that, in the early 1900s, translation studies were not yet conceived as a separate branch of philology. But translation as a philological activity was flourishing in Europe (a very old tradition, in fact, if we think of the translation of sacred texts) in an effort to make literature accessible to the general public, a domain which grew constantly after the turn of the century.[1] In this context, George Coşbuc is one of the writers who tried to widen the audience's literary experience but at the same time is aware of the role artistic sensitivity and critical sense play in turning a translation from form (especially in poetry) to a contextualized meaning, even to the translator's meaning, as we will see below. Perhaps it is not too bold to say that Coşbuc ended up rewriting poetry as he translated it. Today it is generally accepted that to translate is to change the text, and the target language is only the material support for an infinite number of possible poetic languages into which a literary work is translated. This is also a recognized manifestation of authorship.[2]

A strong personality, with a high power of feeling and a refined mastery of poetic technique, Coşbuc also had a certain sense of genial lyricism. However, it is more appropriate to say first that he wrote objective poetry, as critics such a T. Vianu believe. In other words, he preferred to start from concrete facts and situations, „to organize the expression of individual feelings by means of a ‚role,' to start from a very precisely defined content" [our

[1] Cay Dollerup, *Basics of Translation Studies*, Iaşi, Institutul European, 2006, pp.66-79.
[2] Daniel Weissbort & Astradur Eysteinsson (ed.), *Translation – Theory and Practice. A Historical Reader*, Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 464. In an „Introduction" fragment quoted in this reader, Clarence Brown explains an old reality inherent to translation: writers who translate tend to give at the same time a personal interpretation of the source text to the point that, when comparing the source and the target texts, their own rendition becomes in fact a personal rearrangement of the imagery in the source text, often difficult to recognize, but valuable as a literary work in its own right.



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translation], which he then dressed in the most personal and pure verse. As T. Vianu says, an artist who works „on a given theme and in a preset formal code will always be open to that which is different, will be able to record the foreign sound and reproduce its vibration accurately." This is what usually makes epic poets hesitate to touch foreign texts; that is why great translators come from this category of artists. The nature of Coşbuc's talent and the peculiarities of his style enabled him to turn to a higher level of art, more generous, universal in terms of subjects and aspirations, and to a long and diverse work in translation, which made him a landmark in Romanian literature.

Being an act of creation, a work of translation is not only the end-product of the translator's art, but also science. In order to translate a literary text that was felt and written in a foreign language, one must read it in the original and become familiar with all its intimate details, to come as close to it as its author, as it were. That is why translation is also an act of deep knowledge, affinity, selection, and intricate artistic craftsmanship.[3]
Also, the translation may be regarded as a creative act meant to introduce additional elements to better suggest the universe of the translated opera.[4]

Coşbuc was very familiar with, and a keen reader of other literatures. Any assumptions about his generical simplicity are not justified. He was well read and educated. Just like most Transylvanian writers of the 19th century, he had a good understanding of classical literatures as Latin and Greek were in the philological curriculum. He also read in German and Hungarian, which enabled him to study the masterpieces of Western Classicism and Romanticism. He studied Sanskrit and was interested in Indic religious chants and epics.

As part of his realist ideas about art and literature, Coşbuc had what is understood by historical conscience, ie the ability to understand and judge a literary work in connection with the time and environment which produced it.[5] Coşbuc explored in minute detail the representative works of world literature, researched their beauty, richness of ideas and expression, and brought them closer to the Romanian audience so that the latter could take them in easily, as if their own. He used the potential of the Romanian language in terms of lyrical expressivity and power of metaphor.

His translations include classical authors: Homer's *Odyssey*, Virgil's *Bucolics* and *Georgics*, texts by Aristophanes, Catullus, Ovid, Plautus, and Terence. As a young pupil, back in his native Năsăud, the poet was interested in Greek and Latin ancient literature, as well as world literature. When he was only fifteen, the Virtus Romana Rediviva Society awarded him a literary prize for his translation of a version of the Odyssey. He would later continue to publish fragments of this translation in Romanian literary journals from 1902, and in

[3] For nuances and specific features in the translation process of fiction texts in the history of Romanian literary phenomenon see also Gina Nimigean, „Lector in para-fabula, adică despre afurisenia lui Dumbravă Logofătul", Tome. *Româna ca limbă străină între metodă şi impact cultural*, Casa Editorială Demiurg, Iaşi, 2008,pp.117-128.*cf.*:
http://www.google.ro/url?sa=t&source=web&cd=6&ved=0CDMQFjAF&url=http%3A%2F%2Fanagutu.net%2Ffiles%2F2008%2F10%2Fprogram-seimpozion-iasi.doc&ei=V2E7TPatOozKOPLz0YYG&usg=AFQjCNE4yeuRWXS-twiKzBc87M4-_92jXQ&sig2=WDbBUaTLhMHY_fsANbSFPw
[4] Tamara Ceban, *Synonymie et traduction*, Editura Fundaţiei *România de Mâine*, 2002, p.112
[5] All 19th century writers had the same preoccupation for cultural emancipation and aesthetic education as part of a wider patriotic mission, where they tried to "synchronize the Romanian culture by raising the citizens' artistic level." – Cf. Arhip, O., *Opera picturală – o interpretare semiotică,* Iaşi, Junimea, 2009, pp. 24-26.



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collaboration with Casa Şcoalelor publishing house in 1918. Significant effort was put in the translation of Virgil's *Aeneid*, a work rewarded with the Academy Grand Prize, "Năsturel" (1897), which had only been awarded twice before him, to poet Vasile Alecsandri and writer Alexandru Odobescu for their lifelong literary activity. During the assembly of April 9 1897, Academy members N. Quintescu, Gr. G. Tocilescu, Gr. Ştefănescu, and Spiru Haret voted for awarding the Prize to George Coşbuc. „The translation *Aeneis* is a work of great value," „an absolute triumph of an undisputed genius," confirming in the Romanian rendition of this classical masterpiece not just talent, but also a cool intellect, willpower and discipline, great care and refined technique, which make his verse a prestigious endeavour.

He also read literature in German. From the Western litearute of Romanticism he chose texts by Byron and Schiller (*Mazepa* and *Don Carlos*) to translate into Romanian, continuing with his own poetic method of rendition – interpretation and analysis. This was not an arbitrary selection, though. Coşbuc chose works that were suited to his own spiritual making, as translators often do. The selection the translator makes among source texts gives us a hint as to his lyrical atmosphere and subjective preferences. The choice suggests a subtle likeness of temperament and inner structure. It is a matter of empathic resonance, as the poet-translator finds his own relfection in the moral physiognomy of other poets he choses to translate. This made Coşbuc a successful translator: a process of elective affinity explains how he transformed the source text into his own lyrical substance. As Iulian Boldea says, „... the pyrpose of transaltion is to (re)produce a meaning [...]. From a semantic point of view, a word is a complex linguistic unit build around several nuances of meaning. As a result, in the process of transaltion, a text must be adapted not just to a target language – that is, considering linguistic levels (morphology, syntax, lexis) – but also to a cultural context [...]."[6] [our translation]

Convinced that he would find the same affinity with the original, Coşbuc also explored Eastern literature and translated fragments from Rig-Veda, Prācrit, Ramayana and Mahābhārata, which he then published in a book entitled *Sanskrit Anthology*. Apart from that, he translated the most beautiful drama love song in world literature, *Śakuntalā* – Kālidāsa's masterpiece and the jewel of Indian drama, which he published in the Romanian journal *Vatra* (1894).[7] The *Sanskrit Anthology* is an important piece in Coşbuc's reputation as it confirms the confidence in his choice of relevant fragments from representative ancient Indian texts, and in his ability to decipher meanings and transfer them over to the Romanian mind in a poetic form the target audience would identify as close and familiar. The result is a fascinating read. It is not a collection of Romanian substitutes of some foreign poems, but genuinely complex creations generated by serious analysis and research, and his preoccupation for artistic form.

Among his translations, The Aeneid is a faithful rendition of the Latin original, but at the same time a poem of exquisite expressivity and fluidity. These characteristics come from his verse technique and the construction of atmosphere. Coşbuc adopted the criterion of fidelity, and avoided linear translation as he followed poetic meaning and metric structure, which is important and by no means a treason on the part of the translator. A good translation

[6] Iulian Boldea, „O restituire necesară," in *Revista Apostrof*, year XXIII, 2012, no. 11 (270), p. 32.
[7] George Coşbuc, *Antologia sanscrită – Veda, Mahabharata, Ramayana. Fărâme de înţelepciune*, Iaşi, Princeps Edit, 2008.



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requires a great effort of reconstruction not only in what concerns the text itself, but also the momentum of its creation, or at least a close estimate. George Coşbuc's version is the result of a complex endeavour which, in his commitment to the ancient masterpiece, attempts to uncover as many of the original figures and implications as possible. The Academy Prize glorified a large amount of work and a real talent. At the meeting of May 20/June 2, 1916, the Academic assembly chaired by Barbu Delavrancea appointed George Coşbuc full member of the Academy. On behalf of the Literature Board, Duiliu Zamfirescu praised the new member's „amount of literary work" only surpassed by the „quality" of his works, including the translations from Virgil and Dante (*Divine Comedy*), a „capital work which honours Romanian literature with the most perfect version of this poem." „A small part of the big soul of the Academy," as Coşbuc said with his usual modesty, he truly made the highest scientific board proud.

The translation of *Divine Comedy*, that critic Tudor Vianu characterizes as „the most notable illustration of his poetic talent," was one of the treasures in world literature which delighted Coşbuc's soul for his entire life and became his highest achievement as translator. Prompted by his father and then genuinely interested, Coşbuc approached Dante convinced of an affective similarity between them. Here is how he started, in his own account: „My father was a priest. God knows how he got the idea that this Dante might have written something about hell, purgatory and heaven. ‚– George, my son, he told me one day, why don't you look something up for me, since you know your way with books; will you see about this Dante.' ‚– I will, dad,' I replied without much conviction as I thought this was just another whim of old age. But my dad would not give it up and so I ended up buying a German version of the *Divine Comedy* and translating into Romanian the first three cantos of *Inferno*, just to humour the old man. From that moment Dante took hold of me, that big rascal!"[8]

Reading Dante was a decisive step: Coşbuc put aside everything else and bought himself a collection of grammar books and annotated editions of the *Divine Comedy*. He began translation via a German version, Kerl Eitner's edition. Then he learnt Italian in order to be able to work on the opening fragments of *Inferno*. He bought many versions of the book in various languages and studied the whole critical bibliography on Dante. Then he went on a research trip to Florence and learnt by heart many tercets in original, just out of enthusiasm. According to Professor Ramiro Ortiz, „Coşbuc knew all of the Divine Comedy by heart in Italian. It was enough to quote a few lines, even from the end of *Paradiso*, and he would go on reciting hundreds of lines in Italian. Amazing!"[9]

An ambitious enterprise, the poem requires availability, discipline and laborious research in order to pay due tribute to the achievements in the original versification and observe the rhythm in the target language. Coşbuc's text is the first and most accomplished version of Dante's poem in Romania. It comes before the other four existing translations into Romanian (belonging to Alexandru Marcu, Ion Ţundrea, Giuseppe Ciffarelli and Eta Boeriu).

He also researched the enormous bulk of existing analyses and commentaries on the *Divine Comedy*. Dissatisfied with them, Coşbuc decided to give his own version of interpretation. „In the eight years of work on the translation of the *Divine Comedy*, it had

[8] Ramiro Ortiz, "Dante şi epoca sa," preface to *Dante, Divina Comedie. Infernul, Purgatoriul, Paradisul*, transalted by George Coşbuc, Ramiro Ortiz (ed.), Iaşi, Polirom, 2000, p. 57-58.
[9] *id., ibid.*, p. 59.



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never occured to me that I would one day write these studies. I was only interested in Dante's poetry and I thought that all I had to focus on was how to best render his verse in my mother tongue in a manner that is both easy to understand and aesthetically valuable. [...] The more I kept looking for qualified critical opinions, the more confused I would get in the tangle of their improbable appraisal of Dante's work. And then I ended up admitting to myself that, for six hundred years, research on Dante had been an impressive labyrinth of unfounded opinions. [...] I had to postpone the publication of my translation so that I could begin to look into the cause of this chaos of contradictory opinions which were so absurd sometimes that it was downright comic. But it got me down in the end, I got tired before solving this mystery. [...] And then I decided to abandon all these high-brow opinions and *start afresh, from a clean slate, and set out to write about the things I would find out on my own by reading the poem and searching into it carefully*."[10] [our translation, our highlight]

He is profoundly disappointed in the contradictory interpretations about the inner chronology of the *Divine Comedy*. Most researchers consider that Dante had his initiatic, soul-redeeming journey in the year 1300. Coşbuc changes the year to 1298 by taking for reference not the time lapsed from the birth of Jesus Christ, but from His conception, a hypothesis rather hard to accept. He also disputes the existence of Beatrice Portinari, the young woman who leads Dante through Purgatory and out to Paradise. In Coşbuc's view, the character of Beatrice (who was a real person) does not have an identity, but is merely an allegory, the symbol of grace and divine salvation, a questionable idea too.

Coşbuc's interpretation was not accepted by specialists in Dante's work due to its debatable scientific base. But it was reconstituted from the poet's manuscripts after his death. The recovered texts were first collected in two volumes edited by Alexandru Duţu and Titus Pârvulescu.[11] Then they were revised and completed in Gh. Chivu's critical edition.[12] A third edition was made by Pavel Balmuş.[13] Only those fragments that were easy to read and completed were printed, the others were left in manuscript. Coşbuc's critical views did not remain unanswered. Among others, Ramiro Ortiz considers his interpretation too personal and of questionable relevance because, in his words, "his system of interpretation comes from his own heart" and leaves room for dissociations.[14] George Călinescu is visibly harsher: „His notes are a complete chaos. He had files of incomprehensible tables, figures, and topographies of yonder worlds."

But there were also positive reviews outside the country. Rosa Del Conte, an expert in Romance studies, describes Coşbuc's analysis as "the most noteworthy contribution to Dante studies in Romanian criticism."[15] Professor Alexandru Ciorănescu, himself a translator of Dante into French, is overtly appreciative despite some reservations: "Coşbuc's justification is

[10] Alexandru Laszlo, *A revedea stelele. Contribuţii la studiul operei lui Dante,* Cluj-Napoca, Casa Cărţii de Ştiinţă, 2013.
[11] George Coşbuc, *Comentariu la "Divina Comedie"*, vol. I, *Tavola Tonda*, Alexandru Duţu and Titus Pârvulescu (eds.), Bucharest, E.P.L., 1963; vol. II, *La gente sotto larve*, Alexandru Duţu and Titus Pârvulescu (eds.), Bucharest., E.P.L., 1965.
[12] George Coşbuc, *Opere alese*, vol. IX, *Comentariu la "Divina Comedie"*, Gh. Chivu (ed.), Bucharest, Minerva, 1998.
[13] *"Divina Comedie". Comentarii*, by George Coşbuc, Pavel Balmuş (ed.), Chişinău, Cartier, 2001.
[14] See Ramiro Ortiz, *loc. cit*., p. 59.
[15] Rosa Del Conte, "Dante in Romania," in *Dante nel mondo*, Firenze, Leo S. Olschki, 1965; quoted by Alexandru Duţu in *Prefaţa* to *G. Coşbuc: Opere alese*, vol. IX, *Comentariu la "Divina Comedie"*, ed. cit., p. X.



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impressive and commands respect, but is difficult to accept fully. [...] It is now before us; maybe it is short of perfection, but it certainly cannot be overlooked. At any rate, Coşbuc has provided a new instrument for investigating the Italian poem."[16] It is the „instrument" of a *poet*, not a Dante literary critic, who wanted the public to acknowledge and appreciate a great creation through his expertise and art.

In addition to his own craftsmanship, the success of his translation comes from the interpretative and poetic potential of the Romanian language. Its lyrical expressivity and power of metaphor have been acknowledged by translators from other languages. The Romanian language is a lyrical instrument which makes it possible that nuances of thought and feeling be transcoded in translation so that the target text does not betray its source. That some of the meaning and implications of the source text are lost often passes for an act of treason especially in literature. Between a literary and a non-literary text, the issue of faithfulness in translation is easier to tackle in the latter case, albeit not exhaustively. But in the case of literary texts, it has seen recent developments with the concept of *voice*[17] which entailed a redemption of deviations from the meaning and even form of the source text. What seems treason is in fact a dominance of the translator's voice, a would-be power play. Moreover, beyond the human factor, this power play has an integral component beyond the translator's control: to capture an image in translation means to obey to a set of literary conventions of the time, in a linguistic space different from that of the source text.[18] Ironically, the more submissive the translator is to these conventions, the more he betrays the original. But George Coşbuc did not make the conventional choices in translation. Even though he might be held accountable for dominance of the translator's voice, the end-result is both original and recognizable.

With talent, diligence, and with the expressivity of his mother tongue, George Coşbuc managed to accomplish that convergence of meaning, atmosphere, resonance and fidelity that defines a genuine translator. His texts are new creations, the result of filtering through his own lyrical foundation a set of foreign ideas and feelings. Thus, with Coşbuc, the common prejudice of cultural impossibility in translation is surpassed.

The Romanian version of the *Divine Comedy* was published posthumously between 1924 and 1932 under the coordination of Professor Ramiro Ortiz. But before that, Coşbuc edited the first integral Romanian version of the *Inferno* in 1902 and then in 1906, with new additions in 1907 when he had completed the translation of *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*. All the corrections of style and revisions of incomplete drafts were finished by the autumn of 1911, when Coşbuc started negociations in view of publishing the integral version of the *Divine Comedy* in Romanian, „one of the most expressive translations of the world." Poet George Coşbuc was also an original critic with an audacious personal system of intrpretation represented by his commentary *La Tavola Ronda*, written in Italian, a „small bomb of erudition and cultural ambition."

[16] Alexandru Ciorănescu, in "Revue de littérature comparée", 1970, 2; quoted by Alexandru Duţu, *id., ibid*.

[17] The concept of voice is borrowed from literary criticism. Dana Bădulescu links it (along with authorial identity) to exceptionality as achieved by linguistic means (see „Rushdie's Sorcery with Language," in *Philologica Jassyensia*, year VIII, no.2 (16), 2012, pp.129-142). To discuss the voice of a translator like George Coşbuc is the more appropriate in the sense of using all the resources that poet Coşbuc could find in the Romanian language.

[18] Basil Hatim, Jeremy Munday, *Translation: An advanced resource book*, Routledge, 2009, chap. A12.



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After his death, the finished translation was issued in three parts, in 1925, 1927, and 1931. Of course, the list of Coşbuc's translations is considerably longer, we only mentioned here the most representative of his works, based on criteria of variety and value of content and form. They remain models of research and full commitment to fidelity in transcoding forms of thought and expression, and resonated with other creations in Coşbuc's own poetry. The unique sound of his verse and the perfect clarity of his metre were not spontaneous, inexplicable occurences. They originate in a complex process of merging the national and foreign elements, a synthesis between local inspiration and the scholarly art of international Western and Oriental masterpieces. Coşbuc's translations, as well as his original texts, illustrate the point where the national collective soul meets a wider spirituality.

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