ALEXANDRU ODOBESCU- TEN MYTHOLOGICAL TALES. A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE TALE "DEMETER'S PASSIONS"

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Abstract: Odobescu was specifically concerned on mythological tales, which found in his translation the form that brings them closer to legends and even closer to the native folk ballads of great responsibility. „Demetra's Passions" is a mythological tale with a very good translation that entails much interference with the Romanian folklore: it blends the central legend with more mythological legends and makes them harmoniously merge with mioritic myth; the Greek-Roman myth philosophy is converted to Romanian beliefs of life and death, about the course of time, which a mother's pain can stop it.

Odobescu made the Greco-Roman mythological tale „Romanian" by locating events in a Carpathian - Pontic nature, giving Demetra our pastoral tradition, lending her the oral peasant language.

Keywords: oral language, peasant language, Odobescu, Demetra, mythological tale.

The mythological tales that have gained his special attention have been shaped through translation in a form that makes them bear a great resemblance to legends and even to folk ballads.

The sad end in the story of Niobe turns it very similar to the legend of Dochia: not necessarily to the popular one, in which Dochia undresses her waistcoats each one at a time, but very much to the literate reading provided by Gh. Asachi- "Dochia and Traian"- which some time later has inspired Dumitru Almaş in his "Historic Narrations".

Asachi's poem reminds us of the carol about Traian and the beautiful Dochiana, as in the beginning it presents to the reader the myth about our ethnogenesis and the story of Dochia's turning into stone.

Hiding in the cloistered mountains with the few Dacians still alive, "ten sheep, all the family she was left with", Dochia, the daughter of King Decebal, his worthy kindred, prays to Zamolxes when Traian is on the verge

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of capturing her; her prayers are listened: "When Traian raises his hand/ on the fair daughter's head/ the fairy into a stone is turned/ by her god from evil overturned" (Gh. Asachi, *Traian and Dochia*)

The mythological legend and Asachi's literate reading, metaphors of being turned into stone from sorrow, embody artistically the idea of the everlasting: the pain a mother feels when seeing how all her children are killed is indeed touching.

Odobescu even amplifies the end of the tale in his translation (I have underlined what he adds to the original): see Annex 1.

When picturing the white stones scattered on the green grass, surrounding the big stone in the middle, we simply cannot help thinking of our local beauties.

The mythological tale is called "The Passions of Demeter" and its translation, a truly good one, shares a multitude of the Romanian folklore idiosyncrasies.

Called *lady* or *dame* in the English and the French texts, respectively, mother Demeter, as she is called in the Romanian version, goes beyond every archetype, thanks to her moral beauty, to her power of loving her daughter Persephone unto passion, to her leaven of the entire earth, and indirectly of Zeus' skies or Hades' dark kingdom, and above all thanks to the echo of her teachings to Triptolem.

No matter how hard he tries to be faithful to the overall meaning of the phrases, or to the meaning of each particular word in the original, Odobescu indulges himself in adding many details to this tale. He even adds whole paragraphs along the line of Cox's narration, enriching thus the gist of the tale. His experience and scholarship assists him in joining more mythological legends and, furthermore, to make references to the mioritic[1] myth. In the "Miorita" ballad, the elderly mother is a symbol of the pain of losing one's child. She is thus looking for him: "with tears in her eyes/ asking everyone she meets: / who has seen him/ who has known him…"

Odobescu's character, toeing the line of the Romanian literature, has the same woollen coat as in the ballad, and to respect the tradition, it has the same darkened colour. His mother wanders about "the plains and the rivers" with lit candles in her hands.

[1] Mioritic is a term derived from the Romanian word for young sheep „mioara" and it send back to the „Miorita" ballad, which contains a specifical Romanian philosophical outlook, on life and death seen as a cosmic wedding, a lithurgical ritual involving the whole nature. The ballad is a picture of the Romanians' typical moral force of turning any tragic happening into a happy event.

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"Very terrible was the sorrow of Demeter when she was told that her child was lost. She put a dark robe on her shoulders and took a flaming torch in her hand and went over land and sea to look for Persephone. But no one coud tell her where she was gone."

The similitude to the "Miorita" ballad is all the more so fragrant, since the author borrows both the trochaic rhythm and the geminate rhyme from the ballad.

Not only in the ballad, but also in the mythological tale one of the sub-themes is the cosmic wedding, which carries deep meanings: man is mortal and life is ephemeral.

As far as Odobescu is concerned, the meanings are manifold: Persephone passes from one world to another and this passing is blazed on earth: her going away is echoed by the "death" of nature, of vegetation: "the cornfields did no longer rejoice in ears, the grass and flowers did no longer rise on the plains. The earth was barren and unreaclaimed. The people and their cattle were dying of starvation. There was nobody and nothing to give worship to the gods."[2]

Her coming back is like a revival:

"Once more the trees bore their fruits, the flowers spread out their sweet blossoms in the garden and the golden corn waved like the sea under the soft summer breeze."

Demeter is the mother of earth. When her soul mourns, the nature becomes deserted, once her soul is filled with joy, the nature gets filled with flowers and fruits.

What we discover here is another legend, namely that of time passing by, of seasons rotating. In the original text, the alienation takes six months, whereas in Odobescu's reading it only takes three months, since this is how long one of our winters lasts.

Another gain in the translation of the erudite Odobescu is the legend of how the earth has been cropped and how it has borne fruits, a legend that Triptolem used to listen to, being assured of its truth, to comfort his mother while Persefona was gone. This character's task is especially to pass on to the world all of his mother's teachings about how to seed the earth and how to crop. Thus the legend of seasons becomes more profound.

"In those quiet moments when she kept waiting, secluded in her dwelling in Eleusis, she found comfort in teaching Triptolem, her adopted

[2] The Passions of Demeter.

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child, with wisdom and great care the secrets of seeding and cropping the fruits of the earth, Goddess Demeter's fathomless gifts. This great guidance given by the godly nurse to her pupil in the temple from Eleusis, even at midnight, in the light of the torches, had been kept by the people as a holy custom and called *The Mysteries from Eleusis*".

In both the ballad and the mythological tale the Sun and the Moon are the only witnesses of the cosmic wedding, of the disappearance. In the ballad they are actually the godfathers.

In Odobescu's translation, the mother's sorrow has the power to stop the passing of the time. Similar to our popular tale, the mother- or Făt-Frumos[3] in the tale- stops the stars from moving. She speaks to Hekate, "The Lady of the Moon":

"she met Hekate and asked her about her child; but Hekate said: 'I heard her voice as she cried out when someone seized her; but I did not see it with my eyes, and I know not where she is gone'."

She even stops Helios, "the Lord of the Sun":

"O, Helios, tell me about my child. Thou seest everything on the earth, sitting in the bright sun." Then Helios said to Demeter: "I pity thee for thy great sorrow, and will tell you the truth"

Making the characters and the plot toe the line of the Romanian literature is achieved not only through a masterful changing of the action, but also by means of Demeter's portrays outlined in the Romanian translation. These are pictured in landscapes that may almost be mistaken for the Romanian ones; the mother's pain is represented by her darkened appearance:

"and when they saw Demeter, they knew from her face that she must have some great grief".

Persephone's portray is completed through a few nuances that make her look like the feminine character in the Romanian tale:

"She and her companions were gathering flowers from the field, to make crowns for their long flowing hair."

The "proud yet sad" face of Hades is more suggestive when presented under free translation.

"he looked as though he could never smile and as though he had never been happy"

[3] Literally, Handsome-Boy.

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Odobescu's skill of describing nature, observed in all of his writings, except for *Pseudokyneghetikos*, is to be noticed in this translation as well: the picture of the nature is brought into being with a scrupulousness that characterises him.

"*So she went down from Olympus and wandered on a long way until she came to Eleusis, just as the sun was going down into the golden cup behind the dark blue hills. There Demeter sat down close to a fountain where the water bubbled out from the green turf and fell into a clear basin, over which some dark olive-trees spread their branches* ."

Another feature that points to the integration of the translation in the general framework of the Romanian tales is orality. The translator makes use of plentiful idioms and phrases characteristic to the spoken language: colloquial forms of addressing, verbal forms that have undergone iotacism, pronouns, archaic prepositions:

"Elios, my **sone**, **thou**..that **seest** everything on earth, have **thou** not seen my daughter, Persephone… Still no living soul could **saye** what had become of her daughter.. She sat on the ground near a fountain whose water **poureth** into a clear lake."

We can also notice the presence of popular interjections with imperative value that animate the discourse: **"Oh,** mother, shut up!"

The old forms are preserved in the language of the peasants and Odobescu proves to have the gift to render what is archaic and perennial.

The doublets of the spoken discourse also help to create that specific Romanian atmosphere of a tale.

"they came back home, **willy, nilly**"

"**She walked as she walked** and met Helios"

"They reached Eleusis **swift as a lightning**[4]"

Ancient Greece is an exotic land to the ordinary man. If one translates using unnecessary neologisms that pose problems to the understanding. The writer aims at full acceptability, as his unchanging wish is to communicate and educate. He has translated the English "king" or the French "roi" as "domn" (lord) into Romanian, because this term is more pleasant for the Romanian Christian. "The daughters of Keleu, the lord in Eleusis, were just coming for water."

With the basis of Cox's simple, linear model, Odobescu fashions his work from a mixture of more legends. Nonetheless, the translation is not

[4] Literally: swift as wind and thought.

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mind-numbing, nor does it give the feeling of a plethora of information. The narration has a smooth flow of action which sometimes becomes more rapid, to keep our curiosity permanently alive.

The rich passages he inserts greatly intensify the contents of the original tale and add further nuances and extra details, most of which develop the legends he introduces and give a more complex touch to the story. Demeter is saddened because Hades has kidnapped Persephone with Zeus' will; she leaves all the palaces "from above the land of Thessaly" and settles in the city of Eleusis, where everyone benefits from her kindness and her wisdom: "That is why the citizens decided to build her a high-flown seat, on their expense and to her esteem, right in the middle of the city". She takes care of Triptolem and her grief and anger reach the climax when her second child is also taken away from her.

In Cox's tale, Demeter's vengeance bursts the moment Persephone leaves, whereas in Odobescu's reading, her "passions" intensify and account for the title.

There are other inserts as well, which make reference or add nuances to the legend.

Conclusions

1. "In the somewhat barren Romanian literature" Alexandru Odobescu earns his first place among the writers of our renaissance from the past century.

2. He has the flair of noticing the latency of the people, which is truly rich as far as quality is concerned quality, and shapes himself the belief that the artistic instinct of the Romanian people is more acute than that of other peoples.

3. Being a writer, art critic, educator, historian and archaeologist, he fights by means of each of his undertakings to make the future of his people stand up to their artistic gift.

4. Odobescu's unchanging passion is the close examination of Classical literature. His library is that of a philologer that studies the Classics and his entire work intimates the Classical ideal.

5. The Greek and Latin Antiquity offers the modern writer examples of artistic perfection more than any other epoch.

6. "As an examiner of the Antiquity from an artistic perspective, he had a feel for beauty which is necessary more than any other knowledge to

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anyone who dares to cast the light of elucidation on the pure, eternal marble body of Greek art." (Nicolae Iorga)

7. He has understood our folklore, our traditions and our past with a peerless- at that time- knowledge of the Classics, with elegance and classical rumination, with a particularly unique artistic feel and a true spiritual grace.

8. His first translations, from the time when he was still a student, do not have the stylistic variety, nor the rich vocabulary that would become so representative of Odobescu, the translator.

9. Little by little, Odobescu learns how to break the inner mechanisms of the work to translate into pieces that he will put back together with the delicacy and patience of a handicraftsman, using the precious metal his language provides: each word deserves its respect and is assumed along with all its rays of meaning from its focal point of irradiation, by observing laws that he will later on discover and state as governing principles for his contemporaries or for the translators to come.

10. We observe what a difference there is between his initial tries and the perfection of the translations for "Pseudokyneghetikos" or "Ten mythological tales".

11. In most of his translations one may read the endeavouring, the feeling of responsibility when the author deals both with the classical languages from which he translates, and with the Romanian tongue that has discovered so many of its qualities to the author.

12. When comparing Cox's English tale with the French and the Romanian translation we can also notice that:

- there are no major differences between the English and the French versions;

- as far as the Romanian text and the ones chosen for translation are concerned, there are not only natural differences, but also

a) differences with respect to content:

- Odobescu adds words, synonyms to preserve all the nuances and to amplify the meanings

- he inserts whole passages that branch the action

- in one of the ten mythological tales- "Demeter's Passions"- he inserts a legend about a mother who loses her daughter (the legend about looking for the lost child) and many other legends, such as the legend of the seasons or the legend about the cultivation of the land;

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- in another tale- "Apollo from Pythia"- Odobescu translates only the first part which explains why the character is called so.

b) differences in style: in the English and French readings the narrator's style is elevated and scholarly, whereas Odobescu tells the story in a popular-oral style, almost familiar, which makes the mythological legend resemble the Romanian popular tale.

13. The Romanian translator used both Cox's English text and the French one, making a nimble balance between them: for instance, whereas in the English text it says that in the Isle of Delos "a lady" used to live, which in the French one appears as "une damme", Odobescu translates as "a woman of noble blood"; another example would be that Cox uses the name "Leto", in French it is spelled as "Latone" and Odobescu offers complete information: "Leto or Latona".

14. Odobescu's translation reveals a closer connection to the French text, proven by word order and especially by names: Héra, Hades, Helios, Hermes, Hécate, Hestia; Hepheste and Hébé have an aspirate *h* in French are written without the *h* in Romanian.

15. The mythological tales that have preoccupied him to such a great extent have been so shaped by Odobescu's translation that they resemble legends and even well- known Romanian popular ballads.

16. "Demeter's passions" is a mythological tale which, translated, proves to share so many common features with the Romanian folklore:

- it pairs the main legend with more mythological tales and makes them blend harmoniously with the mioritic myth;

- the philosophy residing in the Greek-Latin myth is converted to the Romanian beliefs about life and death and about the passing of the time which can be stopped by a mother's sorrow;

- by picturing the action in an almost Romanian scenery, resembling so much the landscapes specific to the Carpathians and the Danube, and making Demeter look like a Romanian woman and speak like one, using all the oral features of a peasant's tongue, Odobescu has succeeded in making the Greek-Latin mythological tale fit into the Romanian culture, in "Romanianising" it.

17. Odobescu employs rhymes and rhythms when translating and these features make his narration be similar to the Romanian tales, even to ballads.

18. Despite all the cares and inquietudes, Odobescu finds the classical serenity through his works. The author, a most generous personality,

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transmits to all his readers the echo of this serenity and opens his arms to embrace all the children of his people: “je vous embrasse de tout mon coeur…” (I embrace you all from all my heart…)

Annex 1

...”In tears... streamed down her face as she sat there as still as the children who lay dead before her. She never raised her head to look at the blue sky... And still her tears flowed on, and still her body grew colder and colder, untill her heart beat no more, and the lady Niobé was dead. But there she still seemed to sit and weep, for her great grief had turned her into a stone.	“...les larmes coulèrent a flots de ses yeux le visage inondé, elle resta aussi imobile que ses enfants étendus morts a ses pieds. Elle ne leva pas la tete, son regard ne se tourna pas vers le ciel bleu;... Ses larmes coulèrent en silence; son corps devint de plus en plus glacé et enfin son coeur ne battit plus. Niobé était morte. Mais alors même, elle continua à pleurer sur ce rocher, car sa douleur immense l’avait changée en pierre.	“... o podidiră lacrimile curgând şiroaie din ochii ei. Cu faţa scăldată de plânsori, **rămase ea acolo zile, săptămâni şi luni**, tot aşa de neclintită ca şi copiii ei **căzuţi morţi împrejuru-i.** Ea nu-şi mai ridică capul în sus, nici voi să mai privească la seninul cerului. **Încremenită acolo pe piatră,** din ochii ei se scurse mereu un izvor nesecat de lacrimi, până ce însăşi fu cuprinsă de răceala pietrei. **Plânsoarea ei era tăcută**: în trupul ei se slei treptat căldura vieţii şi inima-i încetă de a-i mai bate. Niobe era moartă, dar şi moartă, **plânsul ei picura lin de-a lungul lespedei**, căci nesecata ei durere o prefăcuse în stană de piatră **şi plânsoarea ei în limpede izvor.**
“and all the people whenever they come near that place, said: “See there sits the lady Niobé who was turned into stone...”	“et tout ceux qui s’approchaient de ces lieux disaient: “Voyez, voici Niobé, qui fut changée en pierre...”	Toţi oamenii câţi de atunci încoace se întâmplă să treacă **prin acea vale părăsită, văzând albele pietroaie risipite prin iarbă şi mai ales stânca cea cu izvor,** zic: “Aceasta este Niobe care s-a prefăcut în stană de piatră...”[1]

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