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TRANSLATING COLERIDGE'S *THE RIME OF THE ANCIENT MARINER*: A CASE IN POINT

Abstract: *Starting from Coleridge's view on the making and intended function of poetry in general and of The Rime of the Ancient Mariner in particular, our paper aims at pointing out on the one hand the way in which Coleridge put into practice his own piece of mind concerning the function of poetry and, on the other hand, the translation-related problems that we encountered in the process of translating such a startling ballad-like romantic narrative poem in view of transmitting to the Romanian readership Coleridge's admitted ultimate aim of poetry, i.e. "pleasure of the highest and most permanent kind."*

Key-words*:translation, poetry, rhyme pattern, lexical level*

Before any possible comment on how Coleridge is to be translated or, in our case, how we have gone about translating his narrative ballad *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, which was published by Institutul European Publishing House with an honouring introductory study by professor Ștefan Avădanei, we think it is worth mentioning a few things in connection with the poet's own piece of mind about the nature and function of poetry on the one hand, and on the other, on the way he put or rather had put into practice his theoretical notions in the framework of the poem, in the idea that most of his theoretical approach to poetry was made in *Biographia Literaria* nineteen years later than its 1798 publication in *Lyrical Ballads.*

A first glimpse of what Coleridge intended to achieve by his poem is the agreement he had established with Wordsworth during their daily communion in the year 1797 to contribute to *Lyrical Ballads* poetic pieces in which to achieve wonder by the violation of natural laws and the ordinary course of events and to use incidents and agents which were to be "in part at least supernatural." And true to his word, Coleridge did write a startling, ballad-like, romantic narrative poem of mystery and magic in which are exploited to advantage people's old time pagan and religious superstitions. *The Cain* Biblical story and the popular and literary story (recorded by Matthew Paris – 13th century, and Shelley in *Queen Mab*) of the *Wandering Jew* who having mistreated Jesus Christ in his way to the cross was condemned to a life of wandering till Judgement Day were turned by Coleridge in a martyrdom of sin, punishment and expiation of a hero prefiguring such more defiant and unrepentant arch-outlaws of Romanticism as Byron's Manfred and Shelley's Prometheus.

Coleridge is even clearer about his intentions in the Latin epigraph to the poem taken over from Thomas Burnet's *Archaelogia Philosophiae*, in which he shows his preocuppation with contemplating in the mind "as on a tablet, the image of a greater and better world, lest the intellect, habituated to the petty things of daily life, narrow itself and sink wholly into trivial thoughts."

As to the making and intended function of poetry in general and of a poem in particular, Coleridge has more to say in *Biographia Literaria*. While admitting that the ultimate aim of a prose or metrically composed literary work is "pleasure of the highest and most permanent kind" he becomes more specific by adding that the use of a metrical pattern imposes that all the other parts must be consonant with it. "They must be such as to justify

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the perpetual and distinct attention to each part which an exact correspondent recurrence of accent and sound are calculated to excite."[1]

Coleridge's definition of a legitimate poem which, we might add, is also Coleridge's message to any translator of his, is that "it must be one the parts of which mutually support and explain each other; all in their proportion harmonizing with, and supporting the purpose and known influences of metrical arrangement … The reader should be carried forward, not merely or chiefly by the mechanical impulse of curiosity, or by a restless desire to arrive at the final solution, but by the pleasurable activity of mind excited by the attractions of the journey itself. Like the motion of a serpent, which the Egyptians made the symbol of intellectual power; or like the path of sound through the air; at every step he pauses and half recedes, and from the retrogressive movement collects the force which again carries him onward."[2]

And Coleridge does seem to have achieved a consonant match between the rhythmic beat of his alternative metrical pattern of 8-6, 8-6 syllable quatrains amounting to 106 (the very first stanza going 8-6; 9-6) interspersed with thirty-six five-line or six-line stanzas (with one nine line stanza as well – stanza 48) of such rather different metrical syllable patterns as 8, 6, 8, 8, 7 (V, 13 - 345-349: *"I fear thee, ancient Mariner!"/"Be calm, thou Wedding-guest!/'Twas not those souls that fled in pain,/Which to their corpses came again,/But a troop of spirits blest;*), 8, 6, 8, 9, 6 (V, 16 - 358-362: *"Sometimes a-dropping from the sky/I heard the sky-lark sing;/Sometimes all little birds that are,/How they seemed to fill the sea and air/With their sweet jargoning!*); 8, 6, 9, 6, 8, 6 (V, 11 – 335-340: *"The helmsman steered, the ship moved on;/Yet never a breeze up blew;/The mariners all 'gan work the ropes,/ Where they were wont to do;/They raised their limbs like lifeless tools - / We were a ghastly crew.*); 8-7; 8-6; 8-7 *(*V, 20 - 377-382: *"Under the keel nine fathom deep,/ From the land of mist and snow,/The spirit slid: and it was he/That made the ship to go./The sails at noon left off their tune,/And the ship stood still also.*) and finally 8-7; 8-8; 8-8 *(*V, 21 – 383-388: *"The sun, right up above the mast,/Had fid her to the ocean:/But in a minute she 'gan stir,/With a short uneasy motion - /Backwards and forwards half her length/With a short uneasy motion.*), with the dramatic ups and downs of the tribulations of the hero and the consequent varying mood and tone of the poem. A single two line stanza is an exception represented by lines 422-423 *(" 'But why drives on that ship so fast,/Without or wave or wind?'*).

The rhyme pattern of the poem is another challange to be faced by the translator by its great degree of variation, including here the interior rhyme within a relatively great number of lines.

"And he shone bright, and on the right ..." (line 27)

"Nor shapes of men, nor beasts we ken ... " (line 57)

"It cracked and growled and roared and howled ... " (line 61), etc.

Thus, in the four-line stanzas lines two and four rhyme, lines one and three having a free rhyme (for example I, 6 – 21-24: *"The ship was cheered, the harbour cleared,/Merrily did we drop/Below the kirk, below the hill,/Below the lighthouse top.*), in the five-line stanzas line two rhymes with line five and line three rhymes with line four (III, 10 – 185-189: *"Are those her ribs through which the sun/Did peer, as through a*

[1] Biographia Literaria in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature, vol. II, Romantic Poetry and Prose*, Oxford University Press, London, 1973, pp. 1118-1119.

[2] Biographia Literaria in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature, vol. II, Romantic Poetry and Prose*, Oxford University Press, London, 1973, pp. 1119.

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grate?/And is that Woman all her crew?/Is that a Death? and are there two?/Is Death that woman's mate?). In the six-line stanzas the rhyme goes 2-4-6 (II, 3 – 91-96: *"And I had done a hellish thing,/And it would work'em woe:/For all averred, I had killed the bird/That made the breeze to blow./'Ah wretch!' said they, 'the bird to slay/That made the breeze to blow!'* with line five unrhymed and also 1-3-5 (VII, 9 – 550-555: *"Stunned by that loud and dreadful sound,/Which sky and ocean smote,/Like one that hath been seven days drowned/My body lay afloat;/But, swift as dreams, myself I found/ Within the Pilot's boat.*).

From a prosodic point of view another "consonantic" element of which Coleridge made ample use was alliteration which added to the interior rhyme device gives sonorous significance to the rich visual details or cadence to the dramatic unfolding of the story.

For example, the abundance of fricative sounds in front position such as [s] used seven times, [f] once and [Σ] twice in VI, 13 – lines 460-463 are used to advantage in order to suggest both the whistling sound of the wind in the sails of the ship and the swishing noise made by the prow of the ship through the water, while the voiced plosive consonant [b] used three times in the last two lines points to the gentleness of the breeze while cooling the face of the ancient mariner.

e.g. *"**S**wiftly, **s**wiftly **f**lew the **sh**ip,*
*Yet **sh**e **s**ailed **s**oftly too:*
***S**weetly, **s**weetly **b**lew the **b**reeze –*
*On me alone it **b**lew."*

Finally, a last noteworthy prosodic device, apart from the predominant iambic stress on every other second syllable in the eight syllable and the following six syllable lines, which sonorous pattern both suggests the coil-uncoil movement mentioned by Coleridge himself and also when each of the two lines are considered as a phonetic whole, the resulting effect gives one the image of the halting movement of a rowing boat with a long and hard strain during the rowing act and a shorter easier one when the rowman brings the oars back through the air in a new rowing position, is the word stress which in a great majority of cases is in front position just because so many words belonging to the Anglo-Saxon stock used by the poet are one syllable words or it stays in front in more than one syllable words:

"He holds/ him with/ his skinny hand, (I, 3, 9-10)
There was/ a ship/, quoth he."

On other occasions the first iambic eight syllable line is followed by a six line dactylic one:

"The ship/ was cheered,/ the harbour cleared, (I, 6, 21-22)
Merrily/ did we drop.", which is proof enough of the nearly impossible task of a translator to translate such complicated prosodic pattern which seems so easy in a synthetic language like English, but quite impossible to follow in Romanian which is essentially an analytical language.

Yet another prosodic difficulty for a translator of the poem is the difference in length between the great majority of the English key words of the poem, which in most cases are one syllable or two syllable words while their Romanian semantic equivalents are constantly longer. Since the avoidance in translation of such words as *kin (rudă), feast (ospăț), ship (corabie,* 'vas' being quite neutral semantically speaking*), will (voință), speak (vorbi), kirk (capelă), bright (luminos, strălucitor), sea (mare), mast (catarg), breast (piept), bride (mireasă), groom (mire), wing (aripă), prow (proră), bow (pupă), foe (duşman), mist (ceață), snow (zăpadă), ice (gheață), cliff (stâncă), beast (jivină), crack (crăpa), roar (urla), roar (vâslă, vâsli), soul (suflet), God (Dumnezeu), Christ (Christos),*

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split (despica), steer (vira), perch (cocoța), night (noapte), shoot (săgeta) would be unacceptable, we decided to willingly ignore the almost uniform 8-6 syllable metrical pattern of the English variant in favour of a freer one in between 7-9 as a general rule with occasional 10-12 syllable patterns for the more descriptive passages, while totally preserving the intricate rhyme pattern as well as the interior rhyme pattern.

Special attention has been given by us to alliteration, so we came out with such alliterative patterns as in lines 21-24 (I, 6):

*"Cu pânza-n **v**ânt, ne-am luat a**v**ânt*
*Din port spre-ntinsu-n**v**olburat,*
*Pe **l**ângă dea**l**u' cu cape**l**ă*
*Şi faru' mândru **l**uminat."* – where the repetition of the voiced fricative [v] is meant to suggest the sound of the wind in the sails, while the liquid lateral consonant [l] is suggestive of the exhilarating rippling sound made by the ship through friendly waters.

A different use is given to the accumulation of the fricative [v] in alternation or succession with the rolling sound [r] following it or other initial consonants to sonourously suggest the roaring wind and the forced movement of the ship through the water in lines 45-50 (I, 12):

*"Cu p**r**o**r**a adânc b**r**ăzdând talazul,*
*Co**r**abia me**r**sul şi-l g**r**ăbeşte;*
*Da**r** **v**ânt hain o u**r**mă**r**eşte*
*Câlcându-i umb**r**a-n **v**al lăsată;*
*Zbu**r**a ca o nălucă, cu **v**ânt **vr**ăjmaş din pupă,*
*Sp**r**e sud înt**r**-una astfel alungată."*

Two other examples, we think, are worth mentioning. First, the accumulation of the liquid lateral sound [l] in line 206 (III, 14) to suggest the soothing, glittering of the stars: *"Pe bo**l**tă pa**l**e ste**l**e-n sa**l**bă"* – and the accumulation of the sibilant fricative sounds [s] and [Σ] or the accumulation of [s], [r], [m] and [n] in lines 367-372 (V, 18) to suggest the gentle presence of the wind in the sails of the ghost ship comparable with the murmuring sleepy running of a hidden brook in the forest:

*"**S**i **s**-a oprit, totu**s**i în pânze*
*A adă**s**tat un cânt duio**s**;*
*Un **s**opot **m**olco**m** de izvor*
*A**s**cun**s** **s**ub pat de frunze gro**s**,*
*Ce noaptea-n **s**o**m**n ţine pădurea,*
*Cu **s**u**s**u**r**-**m**u**rm**ur **s**o**m**no**r**o**s**."*

In light of the above we just hope that by employing these prosodic means we have come close to Coleridge's opinion that "the recurrence of accent and sound" should excite feelings of pleasure in the readership whose mind should have "a pleasurable activity" while journeying through the poem's narrative.

A final great challenge for the translator of *The Ancient Mariner* is its lexical level which should be adequately translated into Romanian or adequated, in the more recent terms of the theory of translation. We will restrict ourselves to the very title of the poem which is an almost impossible translation challenge since the word "rime" with its meaning of a piece of poetry employing "rhyme" has no one word correspondent in Romanian so we have decided on the term "baladă" in Romanian and not "poveste" which we only have used for rhyme purposes in two stanzas such as in I, 5:

Nuntaşu' pe-un tăpşan se lasă
Şi-ascultă fără vrerea lui,

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Povestea celui om bătrân,

Balada marinarului. – in order to anticipate the poem's ample use of myth, popular superstition and of the supernatural, not to mention here the very title *Lyrical Ballads* to which "The Rime" belongs.

And no decent one word translation can be given to the English term "ancient" either in the sense of "belonging to the distant past and no longer in existence," which so brilliantly points to the ghost-like, spectre-like appearance of the mariner. That is why we used the more neutral term "bătrân" in Romanian, i.e. "Bătrânul marinar," then in the first translated stanza employed the term "ghiuj" which in regional Romanian denominates both an old man in bad condition and also one who can also be bad.

On the whole, in our Romanian version of the poem we have tried to keep much of the possible world of the English poem created with a late 18th century vocabulary and archaic verb endings into the new re-created possible world in Romanian, by employing a suitable vocabulary which in part can be traced back to the years 1830-1850 in Romanian letters or in regional versions of the language. Mention can be made of such terms as: *drumeț, ceață, sfadă, jăratec, zvon, tăpşan, nuntaş, ison, ceteră, ugnit (uimit), duhos, deochi, nevrednic, scârbavnic, stârv, contură (contur), miluieşte, Maică Preacurată, şuier, şopot, hodină, Sfânta Fecioară, Necuratu', duh, molcom, Mântuitoru', alean, ţintirim, luntre, Dracu', sihastru, druşte, vecernie, rugă, fecior, fecioară,* and many others.

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