IDENTITY AND ALTERITY IN TRANSLATING EMINESCU'S SONNET V *INTO ENGLISH*

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Abstract: *This paper intends to identify the concepts of identity and alterity in Eminescu's* Sonnet V, *which proves to be a resourceful search since alterity manifests here as a consequence of the passage of time upon one single identity (the poetic ego's childhood is alterity of the mature self), and then to analyse the way in which these two concepts are rendered into English in two versions.*

Keywords: *translation, identity, alterity.*

If the translation of poetry has been considered the most challenging type of literary translation, then translating fixed-form poetry may be the pinnacle of translating poetry, given the complexity of levels on which equivalence should be achieved: units of meaning, units of form, units of prosody. The poem we have chosen for our analysis belongs to this category of fixed verse poems: it is a sonnet. Created during the Medieval Age and flourishing during the Renaissance, the sonnet has a strong connection to music, therefore the musicality of a SL sonnet is a must for the translator. Initially developed in Italy, the sonnet flourished in Western Europe during the Renaissance and even afterwards, and we can name famous universal poets who excelled in the art of sonnet, too: Dante Alighieri, Francesco Petrarch, Pierre Ronsard, J. W. Goethe, Edmund Spencer, William Shakespeare, Miguel de Cervantes. Given the cultural conditions and influences, the first Romanian sonnets appeared in the early 19th century, therefore Mihai Eminescu's sonnets contribute to imposing this verse form into our culture, together with other great Romanian poets of the 20th century: George Bacovia, Lucian Blaga, Ion Barbu, Vasile Voiculescu. What makes the sonnet so tempting for poets is that they should render the nature and ramifications of two opposed ideas respecting the rigours of form: 14 lines, the iambic pentameter or the alexandrine a rhyme pattern combining rhyme in couplets with enclosed rhyme, no repetition of words (except for prepositions, conjunctions or auxiliary verbs), the conclusive nature of the last line(s). (see Fierăscu, Ghiţă, 1979: 260-261, see http://www.sonnets.org/basicforms.htm)

Identity and Alterity in Eminescu's *Sonnet V*

Conceived around 1878 and published in 1884, Mihai Eminescu's *Sonnet V* is built around the much treated universal theme of Pantha rhei, underlining in an elegiac tone the way the inexorable passage of time is intimately felt by the poetic ego. The sonnet gravitates around two opposed ideas: the reflection of past and present within the poetic self. Past equals childhood as a golden age while present is felt as disappointing, artistically barren and announcing death. In terms of identity and alterity, the main idea of the sonnet can be expressed as: the poetic ego develops two identities in time, yet the former identity gradually becomes alterity: the adult conceives his own child identity as alterity.

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At a closer look, the sonnet is made up of three uneven parts, according to Gorcea's analysis (2002:56). The first part - almost half of the whole poem (the first 6 lines) – meditates upon the passage of time conceived as external (counted in years) which seems to have brought about a kind of fatigue to the poetic ego who shows no more enthusiasm to the cultural stimuli that caused him so much enchantment in childhood. This first part is rather plain and prosaic, even clicheic at times, with its enumeration in the fourth line and commonplace notions or figures of speech (see Gorcea, 2002: 57). It is this prosaic tone, charged with objectivity, that suggests the fact that the initial identity of the self is perceived as alterity at the moment of speaking.

The second part of the poem, comprising its following five lines, insists on the topic of vanity, the words "în van" (= „in vain") appearing in the first and the last line of this section. Strictly speaking, the things felt as vain by the poet are: the sunset (metaphorically speaking) and the fact that he tries to "tear down" a "sound" from the past; in other words, the past is totally dead and buried for the poet, there is no hegelian reminiscence to wnsure the continuity of the self and the substance of personality. (see Gorcea, 2002: 58-60) This second section of the poem thus underlines the gap between the former identity – now an alterity and the latter (actual) identity of the self.

The last section of the poem, made up of the last three lines, is the densest in meaning presenting the conclusion (but also the climax!) of the sonnet. Its first two lines condense the main ideas of the first two sections: the childhood identity has definitely become an irrecuperable alterity for the adult. The last line of the poem appears as extremely surprising: time is conceived as material, as a palpable object that is growing and the poetic self reacts as "growing dark". This final cry of the poem, which is almost unique in Eminescu's poems, can be interpreted in two ways: either as expressing the anxiety of death (anticipated by the poet) or a state preceding epiphany (the outside world is growing dark to prepare the soul for the divine revelation, for the supreme light). (see Gorcea, 2002: 60-62).

Identity and Alterity in the Translation Process

For a translator, his language and implicitly culture (usually the TL) represents his identity, while the other language (usually the SL) represents an alterity. On the other hand, there is a multitude of linguistic and cultural aspects which are shared in the two languages, thus helping the translator to achieve equivalence in translation. All these aspects form what we can call a translator's 'bilingual identity'.

The translation of poetry is the most challenging form of literary translation. From a strictly linguistic point of view, poetry appears as a superior form of synonymy at all levels: lexical, grammatical, syntagmatic (Bantaş, 1998:121). The first step in the translation process is a "translation-oriented text analysis" (Bantaş, 1988) which will present the poem as a number *n* of elements disposed in one or more types of series, chosen or adopted by the poet. (Bantaş, 1998 : 126).

The second stage in the translation process transforms the translator into a poet who is supposed to re-write the original poem in TL. In translating it, he should resort to the same structures and patterns which form the original SL code: rhymed verse or free verse or blank verse. The translator is not supposed to break these patterns or to introduce rhymes when the poet chose free verse. The same rule (no loss, no gain) should apply to the level of content: the translator is expected to reproduce the poet's metaphors, vocabulary, style and metrical code. The poetic code of a poem, whether clear or hermetic, should remain unchanged through translation.

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To summarize, the translator willing to and capable of playing the part of a poet in front of the TL audience, has two major 'obligations' (Bantaş, 1998:126):

1. to decipher the semantic code of the original (denotation and connotation) as well as its formal system (images, figures of speech, prosody);

2. to render the same elements on the same levels, avoiding both semantic and expressive losses and semantic, expressive and clarity gains.

Through the complex analysis, the translator unveils the author's system, either in general or in particular. The reproduction of this system, that is the inner mechanism of the work, can be regarded as an application of synonymy at all levels. Therefore, the ideal translator possesses a superior 'bilingual' linguistic competence. This linguistic competence involves his being aware of the semantic and stylistic values of the words, idioms. Phrases, patterns of current language in both SL and TL. It enables him both to correctly decipher the SL code and to render it into TL as identically as possible.

The linguistic 'bilingual' competence, doubled by talent are not enough for a good literary translation. A literary analysis of the poem and of its literary context, not only in the SL literature, but also, comparatively, in the TL literature, is necessary. Therefore, a superior literary competence characterizes the ideal translator. His knowledge of the poet's entire work and also of the work of other SL and TL poets belonging to the same literary trend will make his work less difficult and undoubtedly more successful.

The difficulty in translating poetry is that the translator is supposed to render as accurately as possible all the intellectual processes the poet himself has known, his emotional state, his mental disposition, his experiences and searches while trying to find the most effective ('catchy') word. In other words, a translator should choose the same path, either straight or winding, that the poet himself has 'walked' on. (Bantaş, 1998:127).

After the thorough analysis of the original, when the poem becomes clear and entirely explicit for the translator, he runs the risk of making the poem, through his version of it, more explicit, even easier and more ostentatious than the original. That is why the analysis and interpretation of the poem are made for his own use (Bantaş, 1998:127); then, while translating, he should keep to the limits traced by the author as far as clarity is concerned. Otherwise a certain 'gain' in clarity may distort the author's intention as well as the general view of the reader on the author and on his poem. Translation should neither increase nor facillitate the difficulties in understanding a poem.

In point of semantic clarity, it is easy to guess that the less explicit a poem, the more difficult to be translated. At the same time, the more connotations and sound effects, the more difficulties in rendering them into another language. When a translator, after having studied the critical work in point, still fails to decipher the meaning of a stanza or of an entire poem, he should rely on his own ability of decoding the meaning of the original. Sometimes, the choice between several possible interpretations can be made for the purposes of versification.

It is often claimed that hermetic poetry is untranslatable. Actually, if its particular code is not betrayed, a hermetic poem can be successfully translated. Bantaş (1998:132) states that the existence of similarities on the denotative and connotative levels between the SL and TL vocabulary represents a condition for translating a hermetic poem. The difficulties which appear in this case are divided into objective and subjective difficulties. Among the objective difficulties, one can mention polysemy (which is very rich in contemporary English, thus giving birth to ambiguities that were not originally intended by the author), implicit allusions which lead to strange or 'local'

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connotations. A subjective difficulty in translating hermetic poetry appears when the translator tends to betray the original code and system (by making certain meanings more esoteric or, on the contrary, more exoteric than originally intended.)

Burton Raffel (1988: 12) lists a few of the impossibilities (=alterity) of translating poetry from one language into another:

"1. No two languages having the same phonology, it is impossible to re-create the sounds of a work composed in one language in another language.

2. No two languages having the same syntactic structures, it is impossible to re-create the syntax of a work composed in one language in another language.

3. No two languages having the same vocabulary, it is impossible to re-create the vocabulary of a work composed in one language in another language.

4. No two languages having the same literary history, it is impossible to re-create the literary forms of one culture in the language and literary culture of another.

5. No two languages having the same prosody, it is impossible to re-create the prosody of a literary work composed in one language in another language."

The two English versions of this poem were made by Corneliu M. Popescu and, respectively, Procopie Clonţea. The TOTA analysis of the poem reveals a multiplicity of aspects forming the 'bilingual identity' in the translation process: the universal theme of the poem, the opposition past vs. present (alterity vs. identity) – and the way these units of meaning are expressed linguistically. The simile in the first line, comparing the years to the clouds passing across the valleys, is rather completely rendered by Version 1 (including the two notions, "clouds" – referring to the sky and "dale" –referring to the land), while the second version fails to render the reference to land. The enumeration in the fourth line is again better rendered by Version 1 (as an enumeration) "as the lore / Of legend, and of song, and doina's tale" suggesting the idea of folk wisdom and even rendering the untranslatable word ("doina"). Moreover, Version 1 chooses two words that render the idea of charming past: "lore" and "yore". There is no enumeration in Version 2, and no reference to folk oral tradition. Yet, both versions fail to render the meaning of "eresuri" as "heresies" suggesting that folk philosophy opposes the Christian dogmas. Version 1 fails to render the oxymoron in line 6 ("abia-nţelese, pline de-nţelesuri"), which is successfully rendered in Version 2: "So difficult to comprehend, yet full of meanings rare". So, we could conclude that the first section of the poem is more faithfully rendered in Engish by the first version beonging to Corneliu M. Popescu.

The second section has not posed so many problems to the two translators, both versions being close to the original. Version 2 is more faithful in rendering the two phrases "in vain" which define the atmosphere of the second section of the poem, but is more creative in rendering the first line of the poem "in vain you'll try my soul to ensnare".

The last line of the poem proves extremely problematic. Version 1 fails completely in rendering it, thus the climax of the poem is totally lost here: "While time rolls out behind me... night has come." There is no idea of material growth of the time, as well as no idea of the darkening self here. Thus, we could say that this version better renders the idea of alterity, of childhood – because the first section of this poem is more wonderfully rendered by this verson.

Version 2 successfully renders the final poetic desperate cry: "I'm growing dark!", yet fails to create the sensation of material time by adding the suggestion of old age instead: "time gorws old behind my back". But, all in all, we could conclude that this version more faithfully renders the idea of identity, since the aspects regarding the

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present age of the poet (the second and third sections of the poem) are better represented in this version.

There are only two aspects which pertain to untranslatability (thus to 'bilingual alterity'): the Romanian folk genre called "doina" and the metaphorical phrase "asfinţit de sară" (the first noun, interpretable as "a-sfinţit" suggesting the sacred nature of the sunset). Version 1 renders the noun "doina" as such, but we think that an explanatory footnote would have been necessary to make it more understandable. Version 2 simply ignores this untranslatable word losing much of the line local colour. The second untranslatable aspect is not even suggested by any of he two versions being totally lost in the TL versions.

Conclusions

1. Eminescu's *Sonnet V* presents the opposition identity / alterity as the opposition chidhood / adulthood.

2. In translation, we can speak of 'bilingual identity' when refering to universal cultural and linguistic aspects which are shared by both SL and TL language and culture.

3. Version 1 of the poem more faithfully renders alterity (the poetic chidlhood), while Version 2 is better centered on rendering identity (the poetic adulthood).

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Addenda

SONET V de Mihai Eminescu
Trecut-au anii ca nori lungi pe şesuri
Şi niciodată n-or să vie iară,
Căci nu mă-ncântă azi cum mă mişcară
Poveşti si doine, ghicitori, eresuri,
Ce fruntea-mi de copil o-nseninară,
Abia-nţelese, pline de-nţelesuri -
Cu-a tale umbre azi în van mă-mpresuri,
O, ceas al tainei, asfinţit de sară.
Să smulg un sunet din trecutul vieţii,
Să fac, o, suflet, ca din nou să tremuri
Cu mâna mea în van pe liră lunec;

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Pierdut e totu-n zarea tinereţii
Şi mută-i gura dulce-a altor vremuri,
Iar timpul creşte-n urma mea... mă-ntunec!

SONNET V
Version 1 by Corneliu M. Popescu
The years have passed like clouds across the dale;
The years have gone and will return no more,
For they no longer move me, as the lore
Of legend, and of song, and doina's tale
Brought wonder to my boyish brow of yore,
And mystery its meaning half unveil.
Your shade falls round me now to no avail,
O secret twilight hour on evening's shore.
To tear a sound out of the life that's gone,
To stir within my soul again its thrill
My hand upon the silent lyre is numb.
Ay, all is lost beneath youth's horizon,
The tender voice of bygone days is still,
While time rolls out behind me... night has come.

SONNET V

Version 2 by Procopie Clonţea
Years have passed like rolling clouds up there,
Engaged forever in an endless chase,
And I no longer feel the grace
Of stories old that made me stare
And made serene my childish face,
So difficult to comprehend, yet full of meanings rare -
In vain you'll try my soul to ensnare,
O, dark secret hour, the end of a day's race.
To wrench a sound from years past,
To make you, soul of mine, again rejoice
In vain my hand does touch the lyre's arc;
Since all is lost in youth's dusk,
And silenced is old times' sweet voice,
And time grows old behind my back .... I'm growing dark!

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