Between *Pudeur* and Falsification: Thoughts on Translating Indecent Language

Dan NEGRESCU
University of West Timisoara
Romania

Abstract: This paper emphasizes the fallaciousness of the concept of "translation decency" and the extent to which this distorts the source text, revealing primarily the translator's prudery. Such prudery should play no part in translation; the translator needs to convey the author's intentions even when s/he does not share their ideas. Although I am not afraid of being judged for judging others, I have chosen to use my own translations as examples, for the act of interlinguistic translation is in itself a choice, certainly as faithful to the original as possible.

Keywords: translation, (in)decency, prudery, *alter ego scriptoris*, falsifying prudery, prudery as non-communication and stupidity.

Résumé: Cet article se propose de souligner le caractère fallacieux de la notion de « *pudeur* en traduction » et la mesure dans celle-ci déforme le texte source, ce qui en évidence surtout la pudibonderie du traducteur. Une telle pudibonderie ne devrait pas se manifester. Le traducteur est censé transmettre les intentions de l'auteur, même lorsqu'il/elle n'en partage pas l'esprit. Bien que nous n'ayons pas peur d'être jugé pour le fait de juger les autres, nous avons choisi d'utiliser nos propres traductions afin de montrer que l'acte de traduction interlinguistique en soi est un choix. Un choix sans doute aussi fidèle à l'original que possible.

Mots clés : traduction, (in)décence, *pudor, alter ego scriptoris, pudeur* falsificatrice, la *pudeur* comme non-communication, stupidité.

In its crude, indigestible part, literary history – which, according to Schopenhauer's maliciously realistic remark is but a "catalogue of a cabinet of abortions" (cf. Wellek 1974, 305) – often shows that it does not matter *what* you write. Similarly, literary prizes, even the most illustrious, demonstrate that *how* you write is not always relevant either. Thus, one goes back to the classic conclusive saying *Omnia licent* ("Anything goes") which is itself an illustration of what it says (*licent* does not exist as a plural in a … non-creative grammar). Therefore, by way of easily and logically applicable transposition, "Anything translates", apart from what is

BDD-A24444 © 2012 Editura Universității de Vest
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 18.97.14.88 (2026-11-12 13:16:57 UTC)

unacceptable, or the untranslatable, for reasons I have discussed on other occasions (cf. *Translationes*, 3/ 2011: 209-212).

Even if we start in a Voltairean manner, by explaining the terminology, we notice with candid contentment that the etymology of *pudeur* does not pose particular problems. Deriving from the root of the impersonal verb *pudet*, *pudere*, *puditum est*, as well as *puduit* – to be ashamed, to feel shy –, the noun *pudor* refers to a primary feeling of revulsion, rejection. What is interesting to note in the given context (that of the translator's *pudeur*), is that the aforementioned verb requires a particular construction: the subject in the accusative case, thus necessarily doubled by a pronoun, as well as the complement in the genitive case, all of which denotes a very personalised rapport (Ernout, Meillet, 542). To this, one must add that the potentially dual attitude of the translator as *translator* (*im*)*pudicus* of a text is already suggested by *pudor*. This term is not exempt from semantic polarization either, as its meanings vacillate between bashfulness and shame (not feeling ashamed), sense of honour and shameful deed, dignity and dishonour (Guţu, 1983: 1000, or any other reliable Latin dictionary).

These are, ultimately, the states between which the translator swings, if s/he finds him/herself in the *bateau ivre* hypostasis. Nevertheless, when the translator does not "betray" the writer but rather translates his/her writing, the issue of *pudeur* becomes irrelevant. What matters is the accuracy of the translation which results from the communion between translator and author. What the author did not scruple to write should not generate rejection or uneasiness on the part of the translator, who could easily fall into falsehood, i.e. dishonour. The solution would be an *alter ego scriptoris*.

However, a banality such as the fact that the work reflects the writer's animal structure (I think of the *anima*) must be taken into account. Somebody like Eusebius Hieronymus, probably the first modern prose-writer, is great because his talent does not only mean elegance, distinction (whatever that might be) but also, according to Curtius' quotation from E.K. Rand, "a sharp tongue which, if need be, spills the colourful vernacular of fishmongers or strikes the opponent with an epigram" (Curtius, 1970: 92). In such a case, the translator's *pudeur* would equal a lack of communication with the author.

In *Dialogue against the Luciferians,* one of St. Jerome's well known polemical texts, the first confrontation between adversaries ends at dusk, when "the torches, already lit in public squares and streets, redeemed the ones around, and the night stopped the disorderly feud; the two – bearing

BDD-A24444 © 2012 Editura Universităţii de Vest
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 18.97.14.88 (2026-11-12 13:16:57 UTC)

each other's soiling spit on their faces – retired" (Ieronim 1999, 11)[1]. A useless and falsifying terminological *pudeur* could have determined the translator to use synonyms like *saliva*, *sputum*, *expectoration*, which would have destroyed the pathos of the text and referred Jerome to pulmonary medicine; in fact, when in wrath, one rarely salivates or expectorates, nor does one give sputum samples. One simply spits into the face of his opponent.

In the same text, the same Jerome, not exactly a hierarch-loving priest in his lifetime, considers that the increasingly heinous bishop, "thrown out of" the Church, "ought to be lying on a heap of dung, for everybody to trample on" (Ieronim 1999, 19)[2]. It is useless to look for an "elegant" synonym in this context as, for instance, *animal excrement* concerns zootechny rather than human erring. It is also worth mentioning that the translation of the *Holy Scripture***,** in *The Second Epistle General of St. Peter the Apostle*, naturally reads "A dog returns to its vomit" (*The Bible***,** 1975: 1365), and does not offer some prudish version such as „to its emesis", simply because the latter is a merely technical term (a doctor would speak about *emesis***,** not about *puke* or *barf***,** while the individual who "returns" like the dog is, usually, "nauseating").

Being a straightforward man, Jerome spells things out, which should not push the translator into hypocritical acts; quite the contrary. In *The Life of Saint Peter, the First Hermit***,** a young man is put to a serious test: "As soon as everybody retired, there came a beautiful whore who started putting her arms around his neck in delicate hugs and began fondling his male parts with her hands" (Ieronim, 2006: 41)[3]. The unpleasant part is that the young man, being tightly tied to the bed, could not respond in any way, and so Jerome naturally wonders, "What could Christ's soldier do?" (Ieronim 2006, 41)[4]. Another - this time female - character explicitly confesses her opposition to a possible sexual act, even under matrimonial circumstances, which cannot be translated other than literally, i.e. "I would perish if you wanted to mate with me! From now on, you shall have me as your spouse in chastity and be fonder of the soul's togetherness than of the body's copulation" (Ieronim, 2006: 56-57)[5]. Any *pudeur* would be synonymous with stupidity in the case of numerous

[1] „dum audientiam et circulum luminaiam in plateis accensa solverent, et inconditam disputationem nox interrumperet, consputa pene invicem facie, recesserunt". (Hieronymus, 1883, col. 163).
[2] „eum qui proiectus foras, jacere deberet in stercore, a omnibus hominibus conculcandus". (Hieronymus, 1883, col. 167).
[3] „Quo cum, recedentibus cunctis, meretrix speciosa venisset, coepit delicatis stringere colla complexibus...et manibus attrectare virilia". (Hieronymus, 1883, col. 20).
[4] „Quid ageret miles Christi...?" (Hieronymus, 1883, col. 20)
[5] „Ego morerer, si mihi iungi velles. Habeto ergoconiugem pudicitiae, et magis animae copulam amato, quam corporis". (Hieronymus, 1883, col. 59).

BDD-A24444 © 2012 Editura Universității de Vest
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 18.97.14.88 (2026-11-12 13:16:57 UTC)

patristic texts, where obsession with sexuality seems to be a main concern of those who aspire to holiness.

When it comes to preventing homosexuality or paedophilia in monastic environments, things are so imperatively clear that translation cannot be in any way prudified. The Rule of St. Pachomius, translated by Jerome from Syriac and probably Greek into Latin (Ieronim, 2008: 64-65), is very explicit: "XCIII. No one should wash or lubricate another" (Ieronim, 2008: 98)[6]. Then "XCIV. No one should share a rug with another; no one should hold hands with another, be they standing, walking or sitting" (Ieronim, 2008: 98)[7]. Also, CLXVI. "Should any of the brethren be seen laughing or playing with children and making friends of dubious ages, he will be advised to part with his need for three days... If he does not stop, he shall be seized for trial and liable to the most severe punishment" (Ieronim, 2008: 119)[8]. Finally, "CIX. Two people are neither to ride on the bare back of a donkey, nor to sit under the canopy of a wagon together") (Ieronim, 2008: 101).

The author's anger can be piercing, especially when s/he is gifted, and the translator must produce an accurate translation, irrespective of the imagery used by the author. In an acid piece entitled *Against Vigilantius,* in which we can also read *A Story about Vigilantius,* Jerome talks about a certain Vigilantius, also called, in derision, *Dormitantius*. An earthquake occurs and everybody awakens in fear but it is primarily Vigilantius that shocks them, not the trembling of the earth: "You, however, stripped of both attire and faith, seized with unexpected fright, yet keeping some of the night's inebriation, exhibited to the holy men's eyes the repugnant part of your body..." (Ieronim, 2008, 32)[9] Any *pudeur* would obviously be out of place here, when translating this indecent gesture.

The same applies to the translation of medieval philosophy, especially since sexual obsession haunts experienced and inexperienced alike. Peter Abelard in *Ethics* starts from the premise that "no natural pleasure of the body is to be subscribed to sin or assimilated with guilt" (Abélard, 1993: 21)[10]. Thus, there occur situations in which "it is no sin to

[6] „XCIII. Nullus lavare alterum poterit, aut ungere..." Hieronymus, 1883, col.78).
[7] „XCIV. ...nullus in psiathio cum altero dormiat: manum alterius nemo teneat, sed sine steterit, sive ambulaverit, sive steterit..." (Hieronymus, 1883, col. 78).
[8] „CLXVI. Si deprehensus fuerit aliquis e fratribus libenter cum pueris ridere et ludere, et habere amicitias aetatis infirmae, tertio commonebitur, ue recedat ab eorum necessitudine...si non cessaverit corripietur, ut dignus est, correptione severissima." (Hieronymus, 1883, col. 86-87).
[9] „tu et tunica et fide nudus, subitoque timore perterritus, et aliquid habens nocturnae crapulae, sanctorum oculis obscenam partem corporis ingerebas..." (Hieronymus, 1883, col. 364).
[10] „nullam naturalem carnis delectationem peccato adscribendam esse, nec culpae tribuendum..." (Abaelardus 1993, 21).

BDD-A24444 © 2012 Editura Universității de Vest
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 18.97.14.88 (2026-11-12 13:16:57 UTC)

kill a man, or to sleep with another man's wife" (Abélard, 1993: 25)[11]. The big issue concerns sexual consent. Consequently, the "acceptance of fornication" (Abélard, 1993: 42)[12] - which cannot be translated differently, since this is the literal meaning of *fornication*, though "harlotry" might have been more suitable - becomes the object of philosophical meditation**.**

Peter's mistress is not prudish either; on the contrary, she is utterly direct, stating in epistolary form that she would even refuse Augustus, the Emperor, considering it more endearing and "more dignified to be called your whore than his empress" (Héloïse 1995, 95)[13]. She also admits to satisfying their desires or, to use a more expressive word, "we dedicated ourselves to debauchery" during hours of deep philosophising (Héloïse 1995, 115)[14]. One could not translate this any differently, as it would clearly misrepresent the epistle's author.

As far as a text like *Carmina Burana* is concerned, the translator's *pudeur* would result in the death of the text: "When the young boy and the maid,/ Age-forgetful, down are laid/ Mating is happily made./ Loving grows an upward way/ Need is quickly chased away" (*Carmina Burana*, 2009).[15]

The above are just a few examples on the strength of which we can deduce that a certain translator *pudeur* may at times be indicative of hypocrisy, just as a certain conformity would lead to the falsification of the text.

References

Wellek, René, *Istoria criticii literare moderne,* translation by Rodica Timiş, foreword by Romul Munteanu, Bucharest: Editura Univers, 1974.

Negrescu, Dan, *Translaticia translatio – brief script about non-translation* in Georgiana Lungu Badea, Alina Pelea (eds.), *Translationes*, nr.3, Timişoara: Editura Universităţii de Vest, 2011.

Ernout, Alfred, Meillet, Antoine, *Dictionnaire etymologique de la langue latine,* Paris: Librairie Klincksiek, 1959.

Guţu, Gheorghe, *Dicţionar latin-român*, Bucharest: Editura Ştiinţifică şi Enciclopedică, 1983.

Curtius, Ernst Robert, *Literatura europeană şi Evul mediu latin,* translation by Adolf Armbruster, introduction by Alexandru Guţu, Bucharest: Editura Univers, 1970.

Ieronim, Sfântul, *Dialog împotriva luciferienilor,* introduction, translation and notes by Dan Negrescu, Bucharest: Editura Paideia, 1999.

[11] „non enim hominem occidere peccatum est, nec concumbere cum aliena uxore..." (Abaelardus 1993, 25).

[12] „consensum fornicationis" (Abaelardus 1993, 42).

[13] „dignius meretriculam tuam nominari quam imperatricem suam" (Abaelardus, 1885, col.182).

[14] „ut expressius verbum dicam fornicationi dedebamur". (Abaelardus 1885, col. 193).

[15] „Si puer cum puelulla / moraretur in cellula, / felix coniunctio./ Amore suscrescente / pariter et medio / avulso procul tedio" (Carmina Burana, 2009).

BDD-A24444 © 2012 Editura Universităţii de Vest
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 18.97.14.88 (2026-11-12 13:16:57 UTC)

Hieronymus, Eusebius, *Dialogus contra Luciferianos*, in J. P. Migne, Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Latina, Paris, 1883, tomus XXIII, col. 163-193.
Biblia sau *Sfânta Scriptură,* Bucharest: Editura Institutului Biblic şi de Misiune Ortodoxă al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 1975.
Ieronim, Sfântul, *Viaţa Sfântului Pavel, cel dintâi sihastru,* in vol. Sfântul Ieronim, *Pilduitoare vieţi de eremiţi,* study, introductory notes and translations by Dan Negrescu, Bucharest: Editura Paideia, 2006, pp. 39-50.
Hieronymus, Eusebius, *Vita S. Pauli primi eremitae,* în J. P. Migne, Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Latina, Paris, 1883, tomus XXIII, col. 17-29.
Ieronim, Sfântul, *Viaţa lui Malchus, monahul robit*, in Sfântul Ieronim, *Pilduitoare vieţi de eremiţi,* study, introductory notes, translations by Dan Negrescu, Bucharest: Editura Paideia, 2006, pp. 51-62.
Hieronymus, Eusebius, *Vita Malchi monachi captivi,* in J. P. Migne, Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Latina, Paris, 1883, tomus XXIII, col. 55-65.
Rânduielile Sfântului Pahomie in Sfântul Ieronim, *Apologie şi rânduială,* introductory studies, translations and notes by Dan Negrescu, Bucharest: Editura Paideia, 2008, pp. 63-128.
Regulae, Instituta, Praecepta, Monita S. Pachomii in J. P. Migne, Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Latina, Paris, 1883, tomus XXIII, col. 65-91.
Ieronim, Sfântul, *Împotriva lui Vigilanţiu,* in Sfântul Ieronim, *Apologie şi rânduială,* introductory Ieronim, Sfântul, *Dialog împotriva luciferienilor,* introduction, translation and notes by Dan Negrescu, Bucharest: Editura Paideia, 1999.
Hieronymus, Eusebius, *Liber contra Vigilantium,* in J. P. Migne, Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Latina, Paris 1883, col. 353-371.
Abélard, *Etica,* Abaelardus *Ethica,* bilingual edition, translation and notes by Dan Negrescu, Bucharest: Editura Paideia, 1994.
Héloïse şi Abélard, *Autoportrete epistolare*, introduction, translation and notes by Dan Negrescu, Bucharest: Editura Paideia, 1995.
Epistulae (Abelardi et Heloisae) in J. P. Migne, Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Latina, Paris, 1885, tomus CLXXVIII, col. 113-198 and col. 375-378.
Carmina Burana, bilingual edition, translated from the Latin by Dan Negrescu, Bucharest: Editura Paideia, 2009 (deluxe edition, unnumbered pages).
Hieronymus, Eusebius, *Dialogus contra Luciferianos*, in J. P. Migne, Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Latina, Paris, 1883, tomus XXIII, col. 163-193.
Biblia sau *Sfânta Scriptură,* Bucharest: Editura Institutului Biblic şi de Misiune Ortodoxă al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 1975.
Ieronim, Sfântul, *Viaţa Sfântului Pavel, cel dintâi sihastru,* in vol. Sfântul Ieronim, *Pilduitoare vieţi de eremiţi,* study, introductory notes and translations by Dan Negrescu, Bucharest: Editura Paideia, 2006, pp. 39-50.
Hieronymus, Eusebius, *Vita S. Pauli primi eremitae,* în J. P. Migne, Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Latina, Paris, 1883, tomus XXIII, col. 17-29.
Ieronim, Sfântul, *Viaţa lui Malchus, monahul robit*, in Sfântul Ieronim, *Pilduitoare vieţi de eremiţi,* study, introductory notes, translations by Dan Negrescu, Bucharest: Editura Paideia, 2006, pp. 51-62.
Hieronymus, Eusebius, *Vita Malchi monachi captivi,* in J. P. Migne, Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Latina, Paris, 1883, tomus XXIII, col. 55-65.

BDD-A24444 © 2012 Editura Universităţii de Vest
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 18.97.14.88 (2026-11-12 13:16:57 UTC)

Rânduielile Sfântului Pahomie in Sfântul Ieronim, *Apologie şi rânduială,* introductory studies, translations and notes by Dan Negrescu, Bucharest: Editura Paideia, 2008, pp. 63-128.
Regulae, Instituta, Praecepta, Monita S. Pachomii in J. P. Migne, Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Latina, Paris, 1883, tomus XXIII, col. 65-91.
Ieronim, Sfântul, *Împotriva lui Vigilanţiu,* in Sfântul Ieronim, *Apologie şi rânduială,* introductory studies, translations and notes by Dan Negrescu, Bucharest: Editura Paideia, 2008, pp. 12-62.
Hieronymus, Eusebius, *Liber contra Vigilantium,* in J. P. Migne, Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Latina, Paris 1883, col. 353-371.
Abélard, *Etica,* Abaelardus *Ethica,* bilingual edition, translation and notes by Dan Negrescu, Bucharest: Editura Paideia, 1994.
Héloïse şi Abélard, *Autoportrete epistolare*, introduction, translation and notes by Dan Negrescu, Bucharest: Editura Paideia, 1995.
Epistulae (Abelardi et Heloisae) in J. P. Migne, Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Latina, Paris, 1885, tomus CLXXVIII, col. 113-198 and col. 375-378.
Carmina Burana, bilingual edition, translated from the Latin by Dan Negrescu, Bucharest: Editura Paideia, 2009 (deluxe edition, unnumbered pages).

BDD-A24444 © 2012 Editura Universităţii de Vest
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 18.97.14.88 (2026-11-12 13:16:57 UTC)