

TRANSLATING ÁRGIRUS

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Writing of the problems involved in French translations of modern Latin-American novelists, Antoine Berman notes:

Comme les auteurs du XVI^e siècle européen, Roa Bastos, Guimaraes Rosa, J.-M. Arguedas – pour ne citer que les plus grands – écrivent à partir d'une tradition orale et populaire. D'où le problème qu'ils posent à la traduction: comment restituer des textes enracinés dans la culture orale dans une langue comme la nôtre, qui a suivi une trajectoire historique, culturelle et littéraire inverse?¹

This question can also be asked of the project of translating the 16th century Hungarian romance of Prince Árgirus. Antoine Berman's response is that such a question must pose a true challenge for translation in our culture; it must lead to an historical and critical reflexion on the role and activity of translation so as to help translation in its function as a force of creative decentering within the ethnocentric impulse dominant in our culture.

This challenge leads me to avoid addressing the problems involved in the English translation of the Árgirus romance as merely technical problems whose solution could be found in the purely linguistic domain. But there is an approach in translation studies which provides a wide framework within which to look at particular translation problems, and after a brief account of this approach we shall see just how this can be applied to the translation of Árgirus.

Descriptive translation study

As formulated in the work of Gideon Toury,² the descriptive branch of translation studies aims to study, describe and explain actual translation or translation practices and procedures. Presenting an argument for a more or

less descriptive as opposed to interpretative approach to translation studies, it tries to steer clear of the extreme positions which suggest that translation is the mechanical application of acquired skills or simply intuition or hunch. Descriptive translation studies take the translated text as it is and try to determine the various factors that can account for its particular nature.

Taking Catford's distinction between source text and target text,³ this is a target oriented approach. The target text approach sees translation as an initiative of a decision to translate on the part of a recipient or target culture. The translator is seen as functioning within interests of the particular socio-cultural circumstances of the target language and not within the interests of the source text, let alone those of the source culture.

This is a reference to a structural feature of any interpretive activity (and translation is certainly one such activity): namely, that one can never stand outside of one's socio-cultural situation, and that therefore part of the task of anyone engaged in commentary on texts is to try to describe and analyze the constraints which shape their activity as commentators or, in the present case, translators.

Descriptive translation study, following the work of the Russian Formalists and Czech Structuralists, takes a systems approach to literature. Basically, literature or literary texts are described in terms of a polysystem: "a differentiated and dynamic conglomerate of systems, characterized by internal oppositions and continual shifts".⁴ The oppositions within the systems referred to are manifest in, for example, tensions between innovative and conservative models or types, between canonized and non-canonized strata, between more or less strongly codified forms, between the various genres, etc. The tensions generated by these multiple oppositions underscore the need for a *dynamic* model: the polysystem of literature is seen as being "in a state of perpetual flux, forever unstable".⁵ And this literary polysystem is correlated to other cultural systems all of which are embedded in the ideological and socio-economic structures of society. Such complications within a systems approach seek to safeguard its dynamism from becoming merely mechanistic.

Literary translation seen within this model is "one element in the constant struggle for domination between the systems' various layers and subsystems".⁶ Translation can be used in a given literature to support the system's center, or to offer a challenge to the dominant poetics (a good example of this is Ezra Pound's translations from the Chinese). In any case, translation does present an instance of what can happen at "the interface between different linguistic, literary and cultural codes. And since notions of interference, functional transformation, and code-switching are essential aspects of the polysystems theory, translation may provide clues for the study of other types of intra- and intersystemic transfer as well."⁷

Discussions of translated literature, when analyzed within the conceptual framework of this polysystems theory, should be made to appear in a new light: although such an analysis does begin with the target text—the initial decision of its translation, whether or not it is acceptable to a target audience, and what the governing norms of its production (system of constraints) are—it must also be a comparative study, that is, a comparison made with the source text. But most importantly this comparative study should not degenerate into a mere reenumeration of the “inadequacies” of the translation, as is the case with so many comparative studies. Rather it should try to get to the underlying *concept of translation* which is directing the translation activity. It should attempt to reconstruct the translation procedures employed by naming the *constraints* which governed the translator in his or her decision making.

What is, then, the notion of *translation equivalence* being suggested here? It is certainly not a simple binary relationship that services the criticism of “fidelity”, that detects only “error” in the translation and then, on the basis of the number of errors, judges the translation good or bad. Such work in translation studies employs a concept of translation based on the notion of *formal equivalence*: the translator, armed with a good dictionary, should intervene as little as possible. This notion of formal equivalence can be contrasted with that of a *dynamic equivalence* which seeks to get at the mediating or intermediary concepts at work in a comparative analysis.

In a comparative analysis done within a concept of translation as an instrument of mediation between literary and cultural systems, the unit of comparison is a problem/solution pair. In establishing a pair, one should keep in mind that s/he is dealing with *partial* comparison. The solution to a problem is not necessarily the only solution acceptable; its role is to show the relation between the two members. By comparing the sets of problems and solutions in a given translation, one can trace regular patterns which may govern the translation activity. Secondly, one must remember that what is defined as a problem is defined in relation to an *intermediary concept*: one is relating aspects of the translation to a theory which underlies the comparison. All comparisons are by nature indirect: that part of the translation analysis which is chosen as a problem/solution pair is only recognized as such because of the categories established by the underlying theory. For example, a problem/solution pair analyzed from the point of view of metric equivalence will not be established using the same categories as a problem/solution pair being analyzed from the point of view of etymological repetitions, etc.

For this very reason comparative studies of source/target texts should never be an end in themselves. They should be seen as one step in the procedure of formulating explanatory hypotheses (i.e. the governing models and norms

derived from these models within a particular practice of translation), or of mapping the constraints and the decision making under these constraints. The following analysis of some problem/solution pairs from the translation of the Romance of Árgirus which I am in the process of working on should be seen in this light.

The romance of Prince Árgirus and the Fairy Maiden

The English translation of the Árgirus romance⁸ is, as Walter Benjamin said of translation generally, part of the continued life of the original. The source text⁹ which became a very popular and widely circulated story in the Hungarian speaking world during the 17th and 18th centuries, continued to inspire a series of rewrites: the Hungarian poets Vörösmarty and Petőfi in the nineteenth century, and a number of scholarly essays up to the present time. Such information about the texts source system could surface in the target text in the form of a preface.

Within the target text system there is a convention of translating medieval romance verse into prose. Such a practice can run the risk of what Antoine Berman calls the generalizing tendency of translation: "la destruction du signifiant au profit du signifié".¹¹ This practice was not followed in the English translation. The first stroph of the translation, for example, takes the sound of the source text as one of its major constraints; a consideration which, as we shall see, sets up a very different axis for translation.¹² The constraint of sound on the signifier scatters the signified in such a way as to pose enormous obstacles to the generalizing impulse of translation: the work of translation is forced to question the rules of its mediating activity at every step. The next few pages shall be spent looking at the intermediating concepts employed in the translation of the first stroph:

*A tündérországról bőséggel olvastam
Olasz krónikákból kit megfordítottam
És az olvasóknak mulatságul adtam
Magyar versek szerint énekben foglaltam.*

*As tune, lais or sage scrolls bushels of I've read from
Romance chronicles boasting of fairy topos,
Trance-laid, O I've shown knack, moved lectors too, often;
Magyar verse shod lyric I've made, been formed, lulled on.*

From the point of view of the target system, the stanza sounds strange. Scanning it reveals that its dominant metric foot is spondaic. There are twelve syllables to a line and all but the second line have a strong caesura after the sixth. In this respect it resembles the form of the alexandrine line, but its syntax and heavy accents are unlike conventional English verse. Stylistically then it is not marked as strongly as the Hungarian text in terms of its relation to a particular poetic convention. In fact, the lines come closer to resembling modern American poetry than anything from the sixteenth century. The target text also has many more words than the source text. What are some of the compensation mechanisms employed in the translation?

The first line of the English text has four words to describe the type of reading of which the first person narrator in the romance is boasting: "Tune, lais or sage scrolls." The Hungarian text says only "an abundance/bőséggel". Some knowledge of genre itself supplies the reasoning for the translator's use of these words since the first stanza of the source text is here being interpreted as a rhetorical device, typical of the genre, to show the authority of the storyteller. This outside knowledge, then, would be one of the *mediating concepts* between the Hungarian and English stanzas (which are here presented as the problem/solution pair). The almost total scattering of the placement of comparable units on the level of the signifiers forces us to look at the entire stanza in terms of equivalence, rather than to proceed with a word by word comparison. As we have seen, the notion of equivalence here involves knowledge within the cultural systems of the source text. The last three words of the first line can be called a literal translation of the Hungarian. The word order is, however, different since the past tense marker in Hungarian also indicates the person and number of the subject.

"Romance chronicles" as an equivalent for "Olasz krónikák" allows the English translation to maintain more or less the same system of vowel harmony as the original. In fact, an analysis of the system of vowel harmony in the Hungarian verse would have to have preceded the present English translation. Indeed, vowel harmony is an organizing principle of some agglutinative languages like Hungarian which take on suffix endings by attaching a vowel of either dark or clear timbre, depending on the dominant timbre of the vowel in the etymological root, to a consonal configuration. This was also a constraint laid over the English sound system in the translation.

"Romance", as a translation of "Olasz", requires additional explanation and this, I would suggest, should come, in the translation, in the form of a footnote since it involves a philological study of the term "Olasz". The term today only refers to "Italian", but it also was used at the time of the poem's composition to refer to any of the Romance tongue languages. A footnote here

could also add that much time was devoted to the search for traces of the Italian original in past Hungarian scholarship.¹³ The translator's preference for the term "Romance", then, suggests a particular interpretation based on outside sources which form a part of the secondary literature on this poem in the source system.

"Kronikák" is etymologically not a Hungarian word. It works well in terms of the equivalence desired on the level of sound to keep it on the same position in the translation. The same is true of the word "verse" in the fourth line of both versions. The word "Magyar" was kept because of the same constraints, although the English tend to use the term "Hungarian".

The word "fairy" was the necessary translation of "tündér", the word that starts out the Hungarian poem. It signals the equivalent personage within the genre of English romance and has most probably the same etymology in the two languages (tündér-tűnik: appear; fairy-phainesthai [Greek]: appearance). Fairies, according to genre rules, are from another world. Their land is governed by rules other than mortal and this tends to make their location in mortal territory a problematic one. This leads to the translation of "ország" (which can mean "land" or "country") in "tündérország" by the word "topos" thereby allowing it to refer to the mindscape of gender relations, the *place* of romance fiction. (I actually wanted to use "totem" for the lucky correspondence of the sound with the Hungarian "-tottam". Had I done so, I would have been following a very long intermediary logic having to do with representation as such.) The word "fairylane" will in fact be picked up later in the text as the equivalent of "tündérország", a dynamic equivalent to be sure.

The first two terms of the third line in the English translation, "trance-laid", require special attention. They are the displacement for the Hungarian word "megfordítottam"—which could be literally given as "I translated". But the reading of this as an equivalent in English requires obvious reference to at least two techniques of reading that are in fact suggested by the translation: first of all, if I take only the sound value of the two terms, I have the near equivalent of the English "translate", this may be "read" as a directive to the reader to also be reading at the phonic level of the signifiers as indeed it is the phonic value of the Hungarian which is at stake in this part of the translation. Secondly, the marker of past tense on the signifier "laid" suggests a condensation making up for the missing past tense on the phonic verb "translate". When the signifier is read as "translate + past tense" its syntactic position would require it to take "I've" as its subject + auxiliary. On the other hand, "trance-laid" also means "to lay or put into a trance" which is synonymous with the verb that is conjugated with the subject + auxiliary "I've" in "I've

moved lectors". The *intermediary concepts* referred to in this type of equivalence are the rules of language games used in contemporary American poetics.

In the tradition of English verse narratives the iambic pentameter is the dominant metric line. And this concern for a smooth narrative mode is one of the mediating constraints of the translation of stanza 99:

*Az szegény Árgirus hegyeken völgyeken
Mind éjjel, mind nappal észak felé mégyen
Kit elől-utól ér, ő mind tudakozik
De senki városról nem emlékezhetik.*

*Over mountains through valleys poor Argirus went
All day and all night towards the north.
Of those he encountered here ad there he inquired
But no one recalls,
No one remembers the city.*

The translation also tries to account for the logic of opposites, the formal, repetitive device which traces the influence of an oral mode of narrative transmission on the composition of the source text. Thus the words: mountains/valleys; day/night; here/there. The repetition in the fourth and fifth lines does not exist in the source text. Although it was used primarily to break up the monotony of the iambic line, its presence can also be justified by the number of repetitions in the Hungarian text. This stylistic device which is such a strong feature of the source text can be used on the target text for stylistic purposes as well.

Although other translations of parts of the Árgirus Romance have used an end rhyme scheme, this English version does not, not even in terms of assonance—the ending pattern of the source text—as if the iambic meter had a strong enough pattern in itself.

While this translation does attempt to keep the same stanza formation of the original it does not maintain any other constant pattern throughout the narrative. Rather than try to show unitary features which the entire poem in the source text shows by its metric regularities and assonance, the target text concentrates on the repetitive aspects which exist in the Hungarian text on a smaller scale: parallel structures, repetitions on the level of the word, and vowel harmony are some examples I have tried to point out so far. What is "lacking" in the translation in terms of a unified formal pattern will hopefully be compensated for in the more concentrated instances of formal repetition.

If, for example, we take as our comparative unit stanzas 100 and 101 of the source text and their corresponding stanzas in the target text

*Csak egy inassával ő bújdosik vala
Az tündérországbán immár jutott vala
Egy nagy havas közben hogy bújdosik vala
Egy széles barlangban egy kis füstöt láta.*

*Mikor az barlangnak szélire eljuta
Az barlangban ottan egy nagy embert láta
Ugyan megrettene az embert hogy láta
De visszafordulni innár késő vala.*

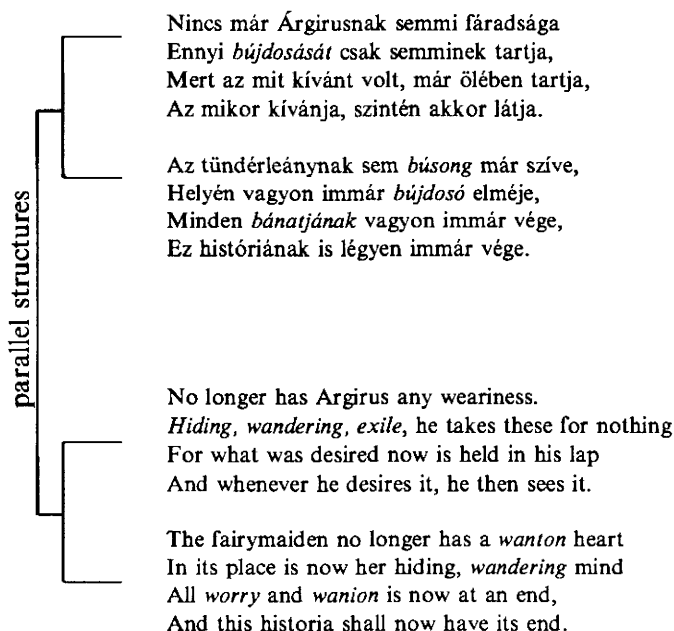
*With a squire, his servant accompanying him,
He wandered and soon had reached fairyland.
Through mountains he wandered and looking for shelter
Spotted in a vast cave a little fire burning.*

*Upon reaching the cave, at that very spot,
There in the cave a huge man he saw.
Quite frightened was he by this man that he saw
But turning back now was already too late.*

we can see that the general problem to which the target text addresses its solution is that of the repetition of the verb “bújdosik” within two different semantic contexts: the first sense is that of “wandering”, the second is that of “hiding” here translated as “seeking shelter”.

Other repetitions which should be noted in this comparative unit are: first of all, the repetition of the etymological root “szél” in the Hungarian text. In line four of stroph 100 it is used as an adjective to describe the vastness of the cave. In the following line (stroph 101) it is used as a noun refering to the cave’s edge. In the English translation this repetition is transfered to another word: “spot”. In the last line of the English version of stroph 100 it is used as a verb with the semantic content of the verb “see”, but in the following line it is used as a noun to mark the idea of place. This would be an example of a dynamic equivalence in the translation. The intermediary concept at work between the two units of comparison is that of repetitions of etymological root words which have different semantic values. Such repetitions are a structural feature of the romance as a whole and the translation tries to reproduce this feature even if it requires transferring the function onto different semantic units in the English text.¹⁴

The same notion of stylistic repetition as a dynamic equivalent is also at stake in the translation of the last two stanzas of the romance:



Here, “*bújdosás*”, the nominative form of the verb dealt with above (usually translated as “wandering”), a word which reappears constantly in the Hungarian text—almost a synonym for narrative following its etymological root “*narrer*”—, is translated as “*hiding, wandering, exile*” in order to get at its various semantic possibilities. But the Hungarian term also seems to extend into the following stroph not only as an adjective (“*bújdosó*” in line two) but as if it carried in its wake the similar sounding “*búsong*” (line one) and “*bánat*” (line three). The translation tries to account for the formal repetition described here by sliding the signifier “wandering” along another chain: “wanton” (line one of the English version) and “worry and wanion” (line three).

The parallel structure of these last two strophs, involving the protagonists in both of the first two lines and then the use of the possessives in the lines that follow, was also maintained in the target text. And, in fact, something of the ambiguity which arises in the source text by the duplicative use of the possessive is also carried over to the target text: in line two of the last stroph in the Hungarian text the possessive on the noun “*helyén*” (literally: “in its

place”) referring either to “szív” (heart) which precedes it or to “elme” (mind) which follows it. That leaves the final stroph open to the two following interpretations: 1. in the place of the wanton heart the fairy now has a “wandering mind”; or 2. the fairy no longer has a wanton heart and even her wandering mind is back in its place. These two interpretations are also possible in the target text’s rendering by also leaving the possessive “its” either as the referent of “heart” or as “mind”.

In connection with the interpretation of this final stroph it should be noted that the source text has at least two lines which refer to the state of the fairy’s heart *vis à vis* the final return of Árgirus. These two lines share certain repetitive features with the lines in question in the final stroph:

stroph 219, line 876:

Ő sok bújdosásán megesik az szíve
(Her heart sank for all his wanderings)

stroph 220, line 880:

De szíve sokára meg helyére áll.
(But her heart after some time returned to its place.)

And it should also be noted that line (880) is part of a parallel structure apparently responding to line 876 which speaks of the heart’s falling away or sinking.

The important thing here would be to maintain the parallel structures and word repetitions in the translation to allow for the argument to be made for either of the two interpretations suggested.

Conclusion

I have tried to demonstrate through a comparison of my English translation and the Hungarian original of the Árgirus romance that the *concept of translation* that I am working with involves a knowledge of the cultural polysystems of both the target and the source text. These also produce the systems of constraints within which a translator functions. The notion of *translation equivalence* which I employed in my work was a *dynamic* one: whether it worked on reproducing the repetitions and parallel structures of the source text or reproducing the phonetic systems of the Hungarian stanza the idea was that a third term, an *intermediary concept* was always necessary to produce the translation equivalent.

My hope is that the translation of the Árgirus text, although lacking the same homogeneous structure of the source text, will be able to demonstrate its unity in those instances of formal repetition produced on a smaller scale; that is, in showing the modes of signification of the original.

I think of this translation of the Árgirus romance not as a reproduction of the Hungarian text but, as Walter Benjamin said of his translation from the French, as part of the after life of the work. Like "fragments of a vessel which are to be glued together... the fragments must match each other in the smallest details, although they need not be like one another. In the same way a translation, instead of resembling the meaning of the original must lovingly and in detail incorporate the original's mode of signification thus making both the original and the translation recognizable as fragments of a greater language, just as fragments are part of a vessel."¹⁵

Notes

1. Antoine Berman, *Traduction et culture en Allemagne romantique*, Paris, Gallimard. 1984. 38–39. Like the writers of sixteenth century Europe, Roa Bastos, Guimarães Rosa, J.-M. Arguedas—to mention only the greatest—are also writing out of a popular, oral tradition. And this poses a problem for translation: how can those texts which are rooted in an oral culture be revived in a language like our own which has followed an inverse historical, cultural and literary trajectory? (my translation)
2. See Gideon Toury's essay, "A Rationale for Descriptive Translation Studies" in: T. Hermans (ed.), *The Manipulation of Literature: Studies in Literary Translation* (New York, St. Martin's Press. 1985).
3. Cf. J. C. Catford, *A Linguistic Theory of Translation* (London, Oxford University Press. 1965).
4. Theo Hermans, "Translation Studies in a New Paradigm," in: T. Hermans (ed.), *The Manipulation of Literature*, New York, St. Martin's Press. 1985. 11. This essay provides a good introduction to current work being done in the field of descriptive translation studies.
5. *Ibid.* p. 11.
6. *Ibid.* p. 11.
7. *Ibid.* p. 12.
8. Although fragments of the romance have been translated for an English language anthology of Hungarian literature, there exists no complete translation of it in English.
9. I used the critical manuscript established by Béla Stoll soon to be published.
10. Cf. Péter Nagy, "Az Árgirus-kérdéshez: Egy megközelítési kísérlet körvonalai", *Irodalomtörténet* 65 (1983).
11. Berman gave a seminar entitled, "La traduction et la défaillance" at the Collège International de Philosophie in Paris second semester, 1986.
12. An example of this practice in the target system would be the translations done by the American poet Louis Zukofsky of the Latin poet Catullus, i.e.:

Mentula habet instar triginta iugera prati,
 quadraginta arvi: cetera sunt maria.
 cur non divitiis Croesum superare potis sit
 uno qui in saltu totmoda poss deat,
 prata, arva, ingentis silvas saltusque paludesque
 usque ad Hyperboreos et mare ad Oceanum?
 omnia magna haec sunt; tamen ipsest maximus, alter
 non homo sed vero mentula magna minax.

Meantool inhabits in style three times ten hewed acres, forty
 quad ranging arable: count the rest in marsh sea.
 Sure no the wit is with Croesus superior po't is it
 you know keen salt too t' th' mode of pose it with it,
 proud turf, farmland, gentleman's silval, cattle skew'r'd, paludal sway
 a sway out t' Hyperboreans and maritime Okeanos?
 O man my god what *accent*; to men obsessed Maximus, all tare
 known *homo* said hero Meantool a man gnawn mean ax.

13. Tibor Kardos devoted some 400 pages to this question. *Az Árgirus Széphistória*, Budapest, 1967.
14. As Robert Austerlitz has noted in his study of Ob-Ugric (the collective name applied to the Ostyaks and Voguls) metrics, (cf. *Ob-Ugric Metrics: the Metrical Structure of Ostyak and Vogul Folk Poetry*) (Helsinki, Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 1958) the two devices most commonly shared by Ob-Ugric verse and older Hungarian philological monuments are parallelism and the etymological figure. (Ostyak and Vogul together with Hungarian form the Ugric branch of the Finno-Ugric family.) But of course parallelism, as Austerlitz points out, is also a structural feature of Biblical, Russian, Germanic, Medieval Latin and Medieval French verse.
15. Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator" in: Hannah Arendt (ed.), *Illuminations* (Great Britain, Fontana/Collins. 1977.), p. 78.