

TRANSLATION PRACTICE BETWEEN ABUSIVE FIDELITY AND ETHNOCENTRIC REDUCTION.

Vanity Fair in Romanian

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Abstract: This paper deals with such concepts as translator’s invisibility, ethnocentric reduction and abusive fidelity applied in the analysis of an interpolated text in the Romanian translation of Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair*.

Keywords: translation practice, *Vanity Fair*, ethnocentric reduction, translator’s invisibility, authorship

In 1972 a Romanian publishing house released the translation of Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair*, based on the English version published in 1963 in London, by Everyman’s Library. Twenty five years later the same translation is published again, having as support version the OUP 1983 edition, the World’s Classics collection.

The object of our investigation is the translation of the first two pages of the sixth chapter of the novel entitled **Vauxhall**. As we did not manage to find the English version at the origin of the Romanian translation we had to resort to all the available copies¹, including the electronic version published at bartleby.com, in order to back up our

¹ Thakeray, William M., 1994, *Vanity Fair*, Wordsworth Classics ; Thakeray, William M., 2001, *Vanity Fair*, Wordsworth Classics ; Thackeray, William Makepeace. *Vanity Fair, A Novel without a Hero*. Vols. V & VI. Harvard *Classics Shelf of Fiction*. New York: P.F. Collier & Son, 1917; Bartleby.com, 2000. www.bartleby.com/305/. [Date of Printout].

argumentation. The beginning paragraphs of this chapter testify for Thackeray's literary genius, as they reiterate what Lawrence Sterne managed one century before and what Russian Formalists will theorize half a century later, violating the readers' horizon of expectation, laying bare the device: "We might have treated this subject in the genteel, or in the romantic, or in the facetious manner. Suppose we had laid the scene in Grosvenor Square, with the very same adventures – would not some people have listened? (...) Or if, on the contrary, we had taken a fancy for the terrible, and made the lover of the new *femme de chambre* a professional burglar, who bursts into the house with his band, slaughters black Sambo at the feet of his master and carries off Amelia in her nightdress, not to be let loose again till the third volume, we should easily have constructed a tale of thrilling interest, through the fiery chapters through which the reader should hurry, panting. But my readers must hope for no such romance..." If Thackeray merely enumerates the various ways in which the novel might have been shaped, in the Romanian translation two of the virtual plots are exemplified in short texts; for instance, the thrilling tale is entitled *Atacul de noapte* (*The Night Attack*) and it abounds in gothic elements (pitch black, frightening, rainy night, gatekeeper killed by storm in front of the orphanage), whereas the story in the genteel manner unfolds in a palace revealing such characters as Lady Amelia, Lord Joseph Sedley and Marquis of Osborne who are fluent in French and have royal company. These two texts do not appear in any of the English version we have managed to read and therefore we can only draw the natural conclusion that they are interpolations of the Romanian translators.

Modern translation theories have been oscillating between two main tendencies, clearly formulated ever since 1813 by the German theologian and philosopher Friedrich Schleiermacher in his lecture "On the Different Methods of

Translating”: “Either the translator leaves the author in peace, as much as possible, and moves the reader toward him. Or he leaves the reader in peace, as much as possible, and moves the author toward him.”² Translators should therefore “choose between a domesticating method, an ethnocentric reduction of the foreign text to target-language cultural values, bringing the author back home, and a foreignizing method, an ethnodeviant pressure on those values to register the linguistic and cultural difference of the foreign text, sending the reader abroad”³ To analyse the Romanian translation with a view to the above mentioned theory might be complicated. In 1970 Romania English was mostly regarded in binary opposition to Russian, being considered the language of the Western, capitalist societies, therefore, the language of the enemy. Translations were, as a consequence, domesticating, ethnocentric and dismissive of the faintest trace of the source culture. The abundance of French words in the second part of the interpolated texts alludes to the style used in Romania in the 19th century as a result of the major shift in the literary language from the Slavic element to languages of Romance origin, such as Italian and French. On the other hand, except for the large number in such short a text, the presence of French words can be a sign of fidelity to the source text, as in Thackeray’s novel *Captain Dobbin* is *de trop*, couples spend time *tête-à-tête*, food and servants in the home of the aristocracy have French names. The common reader in the 1970s was most of the times monolingual and the translations were the only permitted way of experiencing foreign cultures of English origin. In spite of the global wide spread interest in foreign languages, the contemporary reader feels comfortable within the limits of his own language, as he is the product of

² Cited in Andre Lefevere (ed.), 1992, *History, Culture: A Sourcebook*, Routledge, p.149

³ Lawrence Venuti, (1995), *Translator’s Invisibility: A History of Translation*, Routledge, London, p.20

the massive and rapid linguistic transfer in this multicultural age, therefore texts are domesticated and naturalised to easily meet the reader's needs. Scleiermacher, on the other hand, had in mind a limited readership, an educated elite, in perfect knowledge of the foreign language, who took pleasure in reading both the translation and the original and was perfectly able to move towards the author, to discern and appreciate the difference in linguistic expression. While the specialized reader, after having read both the English and the Romanian texts, will critically ponder over linguistic matters, common readers will spend rewarding moments reading the Romanian translation of Thackeray's novel. Perfectly meeting the requirements of fluency, the Romanian version can be considered a good translation.

Domesticating translations, on the other hand, perpetuate, among other things, the marginal status of translators and of translation studies, since common readers will mistake the translation for the original and will never integrate ideas of progress, literary innovation and concepts of alterity. "Translators are very much aware that any sense of authorial presence in a translation is an illusion, an effect of transparent discourse, comparable to a 'stunt', but they nonetheless assert that they participate in a 'psychological' relationship with the author in which they repress their own 'personality'."⁴ The Romanian translators of Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* might not have been ready to repress their personality to such an extent, as to completely disappear under the crushing presence of the author. One of the translators, Ioan Frunzetti, lived his young years in the intellectual proximity of reputable Romanian literary and cultural theorists and philosophers such as Constantin Noica, Mircea Eliade, Mircea Vulc nescu, Tudor Vianu and tried his hand in essay and poetry writing. As a consequence, the

⁴ Idem, p.7

intricate concept of authorship might have bothered him to such an extent that it came out, as a slip of the tongue, in the form of the interpolated text. At the end of the interpolation he even comments on Thackeray's controversial biography, (ab)using Thackeray's self-ironic style: "Vede i (...) *cum ar fi putut* fi scris acest poveste dac autorul s-ar fi gîndit, numai; pentru c , dac e s spunem adev rul adev rat, el e tot a a de familiarizat cu Newgate ca i cu palatele preacinstitei noastre aristocra ii, c ci le-a v zut pe dinafar i pe una, i pe celelalte."⁵

Mainstream tradition in translation theory pays tribute to the use of reductive, assimilating methods that conform to the dominant poetics of the receiving culture. An example of such assimilating tendencies is the use of the oxymoronic construction *monstruos de frumoas* (monstrously beautiful) in the interpolated text as an absolute superlative. Such constructions were the consequence of the massive linguistic imports from foreign languages in the 19th century Romania that often resulted in the distortion of the Romanian language, harshly criticized by some of the intellectuals of the age such as Titu Maiorescu, the dominant critical personality of the end of the century. The Romanian translators want the novel to be read as a nineteenth century text, giving it the flavour of the Romanian fiction of the time. On the other hand, locations and names of characters are English even in the interpolated text, Thackeray's rich humorous style is preserved and his relationship with his own characters is unaltered. These might be signs of resistance to a tradition that is responsible for the production of weak translations, an attempt to create a forceful translation method that values experimentation and

⁵ This is how this story *might have been written*, if only the author had thought about it; because, to tell you the naked truth, both Newgate and the palaces of our noble aristocracy are familiar to him, as he saw all of them both from the inside and from the outside. (our translation)

celebrates displacement and remobilization of textual energies. Venuti borrows Phillip Lewis's concept of 'abusive fidelity' to define this abdication from traditionally accepted translation norms.

On the one hand, translators bring the author home, trying to make the text perfectly familiar and accessible for the Romanian readers, on the other hand they challenge the powerful concept of authorship experimenting, initiating the reader in different literary genres, bluntly revealing their presence in the text in the middle of one of the most important chapters in the novel. The translator is aware of his/her status but this doesn't prevent him/her from playing with already established norms without ever really trying to break them.

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