

Poe's Litotes (in Romanian Translation) or Why *Less* is Always *More*

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Abstract: The paper looks into the way the various translators of Edgar Allan Poe's fiction into Romanian dealt with a figure of speech (or of thought) Poe seems to have been especially fond of: the litotes. Romanian versions spanning 55 years (1957-2012) are examined with a view to pinpointing whether litotes are interpreted as having to do with intensification or attenuation.

Keywords: litotes, fiction, translation, intensification, style

Edgar Allan Poe's fiction has always been controversial (due to its euphuistic style rather than to content). Often accused of verbosity, floridity, bombasticism, Poe's writing can easily be summed up as excessive. Highly conscientious in matters of sound and rhythm, the American author found it worthwhile to always rely on alliteration, rhyme and antithesis in an attempt to amuse and bemuse his readers. If his prose is deemed unreadable by some (Mark Twain or Harold Bloom among others, who often marvelled at Poe's "bad writing"), there are also innumerable others ready to defend him as a stylist, a linguistic craftsman, a rhetorician (see Zimmerman 1999, 2005 etc.).

Poe's highly ornate, incredibly adorned style revolves around accentuation or prominence. In order to achieve the right amount of salience or intensification, he resorts to a wide range of linguistic and rhetorical means. As shown elsewhere (Hăisan,

2014)², his “purple prose” is strewn with italics, superlatives, stylistic inversions, postposed adjectives, as well as with all sorts of repetitions (from epizeuxis and diacope to isocolon, tricolon or even tricolon crescens, from polyptoton, anaphora, polysyndeton, anadiplosis, epanalepsis, and semantic repetition to various other parallelisms etc.). Apart from these, a major rhetorical device he makes use of, though perhaps less obvious than the rest, is the litotes.

As a figure of great subtlety and complexity, the litotes has been seen from different angles. The lack of consensus in definitions reflects the divergent theoretical positions, especially in Romanian dictionaries. Thus, the DEX (*Dicționarul explicativ al limbii române*, 1998: 578) offers a rather vague explanation: “figură de stil care constă în a spune cât mai puțin și a face să se înțeleagă cât mai mult” [figure of speech consisting in saying as little as possible while intimating as much as possible]³. Leon Levițchi’s *Manualul traducătorului* [The Translator’s Handbook] describes it as “adevăr exprimat discret [care] scoate în relief pozitivul prin negativ și invers” [a piece of truth discreetly expressed which points out the positive by means of the negative and the other way around] (Levițchi, 2001: 89). At the same time, Levițchi makes an important distinction between *litotes* and *meiosis* (which is often given as a synonym): *meiosis* always attenuates whereas *litotes* only seems to attenuate. Bidu-Vrănceanu *et al.*’s *Dicționar de științe ale limbajului* [Dictionary of Language Sciences] provides a more enlightening perspective on litotes, by classifying them as figures of thought rather than as figures of speech and defining them based on a term which fits the profile of both litotes and Poe, namely *dissimulation*. Litotes is

² This is a much elaborated version of a subchapter which appeared in Romanian (listed as Hăisan (2014) in the Bibliography).

³ Back-translation, usually placed between brackets, is always mine.

thus defined as a form of dissimulation similar to euphemism, which implies a kind of reticence in expressing a given idea. Also, if most dictionaries delineate litotes based on negative structures, this one admits there is a way (in Romanian, at least) of expressing it outside negation. Since this paper deals with Poe's litotes in Romanian translation, the Romanian take on the matter needs to be taken into account. English dictionaries, on the other hand, dismiss litotes as a form of attenuation based on the following mechanism: an affirmative being expressed by negating its opposite. So far the focus on attenuation as a means of achieving intensification has drawn attention to irony, which is exactly the path taken by Brett Zimmerman: he defines litotes as an "ironical understatement", "a denial of the contrary, often using *no* or *not*" (Zimmerman, 2005: 245). On the other hand, while he admits that *litotes* can be employed to enhance the impressiveness of what one says, Zimmerman seems to doubt Poe uses litotes with this particular function (*i.e.* to intensify the meaning), believing instead that it occasionally "makes for awkwardness of expression" (*ibidem*).

If litotes can thus be seen as not forceful enough to intensify, it is equally regarded as less ironic. According to Giora *et al.* (2005), negation always involves mitigation, so in relying on negation, litotes loses intensity and strength. "A negated version of [an] overstatement, (*He is not exceptionally bright*), is also rated as ironic, albeit to a lesser extent" (Giora *et al.*, 2005: 81). Compared to the affirmative, non-mitigated overstatement, the litotes will always contain a "toned down irony" (*ibidem*, 94).

Mitigating, however, does not mean eliminating the negated concept altogether. On the contrary, litotes offer a paradoxical means of intensifying while downtoning, while also inviting analysis and possibly criticism of that particular degree of intensification. The key to successful litotes is maintaining

balance between the two poles of intensification. What happens in translation with litotes is, however, something different. As follows, we will look into the way Poe's translators into Romanian have dealt with this figure of speech. We will begin with Poe's famous short story *The Black Cat*, which contains two examples of litotes, which I highlighted by means of italics (sometimes together with other words making up a unit or an intelligible phrase).

| Litotes in Poe's <i>The Black Cat</i> vs. Two Romanian Versions | | |
|--|---|--|
| Poe (1990) | Poe (2005; translated by Liviu Cotrău) | Poe (2008; translated by Ioana Ionașek) |
| I married early, and was happy to find in my wife a disposition <i>not uncongenial</i> to my own. | M-am însurat de timpuriu și am fost fericit să descopăr la soția mea o fire <i>asemănătoare</i> cu a mea [a temper very similar to mine]. | M-am căsătorit devreme și am fost bucuros să descopăr că nevasta mea <i>nu avea concepții potrivnice</i> mie [did not have any conceptions hostile to me]. |
| In speaking of his [the black cat's] intelligence, my wife, who at heart was <i>not a little tinctured with superstition</i> , made frequent allusion to | Vorbind de inteligența lui, soția mea, care în adâncul sufletului era <i>cam superstițioasă</i> [rather / kind of superstitious], făcea deseori aluzie la | Soția mea <i>nu credea în superstiții</i> [did not believe in superstitions], dar în legătură cu inteligența pisicii de multe ori făcea aluzii la antica |

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| the ancient popular notion, which regarded all black cats as witches in disguise. | vechea credință populară după care toate pisicile negre ar fi niște vrăjitoare deghizate. | noțiune populară, conform căreia vrăjitoarele se deghizau în pisici negre. |
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Table 1. Litotes in Poe's *The Black Cat*

We can see in the table above that the treatment of litotes in translation is rather baffling. Liviu Cotrău, who normally prefers literal rendition, neutralizes the figure of speech, making it more explicit. Thus, *not uncongenial* becomes *asemănătoare* (i.e. more or less *congenial*), whereas the pompous *not a little tintured with superstition* becomes, in Romanian, *cam superstițioasă*, which manages to convey the original meaning at the expense of style. Ioana Ionașek's translation, too, avoids transposing the litotes as figures of speech and instead deals with them by circumlocution. Her *nu avea concepții potrivnice mie* does point to similarity and harmony between the two partners, but at the same time triggers the implicature of the wife's submissiveness, something the original text does not allude to. As for *not a little tintured with superstition*, it seems to have been misunderstood by Ionașek, who expresses the exact opposite of what Poe says (i.e. *nu credea în superstiții*).

For the litotes in *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* we will focus on three Romanian versions as, besides Liviu Cotrău and Ioana Ionașek, there is also an interesting translation signed by poet Ion Vinea.

| Litotes in Poe's <i>The Murders in the Rue Morgue</i> vs. Three Romanian Versions | | | |
|--|--|--|---|
| Poe (1990) | Poe (1957; translated by Ion Vinea) | Poe (2008; translated by Ioana Ionașek) | Poe (2012; translated by Liviu Cotrău) |
| <p>A man entered. He was a sailor, evidently – a tall, stout, and muscular-looking person, with a certain dare-devil expression of countenance, <i>not altogether unprepossessing</i>.</p> | <p>Un om se ivi în prag. Se vedea bine că e marinar, un bărbat voinic, înalt și musculos, cu o înfățișare plină de un fel de îndrăzneală drăcească, <i>nu lipsită de farmec</i> [by no means lacking charm].</p> | <p>Un bărbat a intrat. Evident, era un marinar înalt, bine făcut, muscular, cu o expresie îndrăzneată, per total era o prezență <i>acceptabilă</i> [acceptable].</p> | <p>În prag apăru un bărbat. Evident, era un marinar, un individ înalt, voinic și musculos, cu o expresie arogantă a feței, <i>nu lipsită de farmec</i> [by no means lacking charm].</p> |

Table 2. Litotes in Poe's *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*

Both Vinea and Cotrău preserve the litotic mechanism (*nu lipsită de farmec*), with Vinea providing an entire paragraph of exquisite literariness and flawless stylistic restitution, and Cotrău reverently sticking, as he usually does, to the letter of Poe's text. Ionașek's text, on the other hand, contains a number of errors

(e.g. resorting to syntactic literality which results in an awkward *un bărbat a intrat*, placing *evidently* so as to suggest it was obvious the sailor was tall rather than the idea that one could guess from his appearance that the man worked as a sailor, or using *muscular* instead of *musculos*). Among them, a very blunt rendering of Poe's litotes (i.e. *o prezență acceptabilă* [an acceptable appearance]). Or, the double negation in *not altogether unprepossessing* does not lend itself to an ironic reading; what we have here is a classic litotes which intensifies the meaning (i.e. prepossessing, attractive) by denying its opposite. Saying the sailor's appearance was "acceptable" is therefore not enough, when Poe indirectly and deftly suggests that despite his coarseness and overconfidence, the character was quite appealing.

For a litotes in *The Gold Bug* we have four Romanian versions (besides Liviu Cotrău's, who actually translated Poe's fiction in its entirety, we also have versions meant for children signed by Agop Bezerian, Carina Filatov and Dan Starcu, all of which happened to be published in 2003, with Bezerian's and Filatov's being bilingual editions).

| Litotes in Poe's <i>The Gold Bug</i> vs. Four Romanian Versions | | | | |
|--|---|---|--|--|
| Poe (1990) | Poe (2003; translated by Agop Bezerian) | Poe (2003; translated by Carina Filatov) | Poe (2003; translated by Dan Starcu) | Poe (2005; translated by Liviu Cotrău) |
| A fine fire was blazing upon the hearth. It was a | Un foc strașnic ardea, cu vâlvătăi, în șemineu. | Un foc bun strălucea în cămin. Era o noutate <i>pentru care</i> | În vatră ardea un foc strașnic. Era o | În vatră ardea un foc strașnic. Era o |

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| novelty, <i>by no means an ungrateful one.</i> | Era o surpriză și, în nici un caz, una neplăcută [by no means an unpleasant one]. | <i>eram fără îndoială recunoscător</i> [for which I was undoubtedly grateful]. | surpriză, <i>ba chiar una plăcută</i> [and a nice one at that / what's more, a nice one]. | noutate pentru mine, și <i>câtuși de puțin neplăcută</i> [not in the least unpleasant]. |
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Table 3. Litotes in Poe's *The Gold Bug*

Liviu Cotrău's rendering is by far the most inspired of the four, followed closely by Agop Bezerian's (though slightly unwieldy by comparison). Carina Filatov seems to concentrate on *ungrateful* rather than on the litotes, whereas Dan Starcu prefers to replace the double negation with a more relatable affirmation (which is somewhat understandable, given that his translation addresses children, and it is generally supposed explicitness should maintain preeminence over style in a translation for children).

A special type of litotic structure Poe uses excessively is *no little* + noun or *not a little* + adjective, as we will see in examples from *The Spectacles*, *The Thousand-and-Second Tale of Scheherazade* and *The Duc de L'Omelette*.

| Litotes in Poe's <i>The Spectacles</i> vs. Two Romanian Versions | | |
|--|------------------------|------------------------|
| Poe (1990) | Poe (1963; translated) | Poe (2005; translated) |

| | | |
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| | by Ion Vinea) | by Liviu Cotrău) |
| This request – must I confess it? – confused me <i>in no little degree</i> . | Această rugămintă – să o mărturisesc? – m-a uluit <i>îndeajuns</i> [quite enough]. | Rugămintea aceasta – se cade oare s-o mărturisesc? – mă tulbură <i>nu în mică măsură</i> [in no little degree]. |

Table 4. Litotes in Poe's *The Spectacles*

Here, if Vinea prefers to elude the figure of speech and translate the meaning only, Cotrău stays close to Poe's text and provides a very similar expression in Romanian. The same applies to the litotes in *The Thousand-and-Second Tale of Scheherazade*, which Cotrău transposes almost literally, unlike Ion Vinea and Florența Drăghicescu, who, though using intensification, prefer to normalize the phrase.

| Litotes in Poe's <i>The Thousand-and-Second Tale of Scheherazade</i> | | | |
|---|---|--|---|
| vs. Three Romanian Versions | | | |
| Poe (1990) | Poe (1963; translated by Ion Vinea) | Poe (2004; translated by Florența Drăghicescu) | Poe (2005; translated by Liviu Cotrău) |
| ...I was <i>not a little astonished</i> to discover that the literary world | ... <i>mare mi-a fost mirarea</i> [I was greatly astonished] când | ... <i>mare mi-a fost mirarea</i> [I was greatly astonished] | ... <i>nu mică mi-a fost mirarea</i> [I was not a |

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| has hitherto been strangely in error respecting the fate of the vizier's daughter, Scheherazade... | am descoperit că oamenii de litere s-au înșelat până acum într-un chip foarte straniu cu privire la soarta Șeherezadei, fiica vizirului... | descoperind că lumea literelor se înșelase până acum în ceea ce privește soarta rezervată fiicei vizirului, Șeherezada... | little astonished] să descopăr că lumea literară s-a înșelat până acum, în mod ciudat, cât privește soarta fiicei vizirului, Șeherezadei. .. |
|---|--|--|--|

Table 5. Litotes in Poe's *The Thousand-and-Second Tale of Scheherazade*

Finally, our last example (extracted from *The Duc de L'Omelette*) shows beyond a doubt that whatever understatement flavour might litotes have, when used by Poe, it is often humorously exploited precisely for the way it achieves an effect of intensification.

| Litotes in Poe's <i>The Duc de L'Omelette</i> vs. Two Romanian Versions | |
|--|---|
| Poe (1990) | Poe (1990; translated by Liviu Cotrău) |
| The pantaloons, which thou sayest were made by Bourdon, are an excellent pair of linen drawers, and thy robe-de-chambre is a | Nădragii despre care spui c-ar fi lucrați de Bourdon sunt, pe legea mea, niște izmene de olandă nemaipomenite, iar robe-de- |

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|---|---|
| shroud of <i>no scanty dimensions</i> . | chambre de pe tine un lințoliu <i>mare cât casa</i> [as big as a house]. |
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Table 6. Litotes in Poe's *The Duc de L'Omelette*

The very fact that the translator uses a hyperbole to render it into Romanian testifies to the fact that, at least in Poe's case, litotes are meant to prove once again that "less is more" and that attenuation is definitely not a priority for him. To what extent the various translators of Poe's fiction into Romanian paid attention to this subtle yet complex figure of speech is another matter altogether: we can see that some of them are really responsive to this particular stylistic quirk (Cotrău, Vinea), while others are less interested in finding suitable counterparts in Romanian (which is a pity, since the figure as such is not very sophisticated – as complex as its implicatures might be – and the Romanian language does have a wide range of highly expressive turns of phrase that could be used to match Poe's).

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