

THREE TIMES RILKE: Variants and the Invariant in the Translation of Poetry

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I. Introduction

The following analysis of three translations of Rilke's "Abend" aims at highlighting some of the problems that the translator encounters when tackling poetry. The problem of the untranslatability of poetry has been negated from the outset: the position taken here is that if at least some aspect of the source language text (SLT) is to be found in the target language text (TLT), a translation has occurred. Whether or not the translation is adequate or to what degree it is truthful to the original will not be considered here. Instead, this exercise will focus on an examination of the different approaches that three translators¹ of Rilke have taken. As we shall see, while some 'core meaning' (to be explicated further) is retained in the translations, there exists a considerable degree of variation as well.

The exercise will consist of two parts. First, using a variation of Popovic's theory, the concept of variants and the invariant in poetry translations will be examined using the three translations at hand. Having documented the variations found, I will proceed, in part II, to highlight the main reason why such variations must occur.

1 The translations are as follows: Albert E. Fleming, 'At Sundown', in *Rilke: Selected Poems* (New York: Methuen, 1986) p59 ; W. Arnd, 'Evening', in *The Best of Rilke* (Hannover: University Press of New England, 1989) p 10; M.D. Herter Norton, 'Evening', in *Translations from the poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1938).

II. The Variants and the Invariant in the Translations of Rilke's 'der Abend'

In order to systematize the comparison of the three TLTs at hand, I have chosen to use Popovic's concept of an *invariant core* as a guideline. As summarized by Bassnett-McGuire, this core "is represented by stable, basic and constant semantic elements in a text, whose existence can be proved by experimental semantic condensation (Bassnett-McGuire, 26-27). While it is not possible to reproduce Popovic's "semantic condensations", here, it is nevertheless possible to use his accompanying definitions of variants and the invariant to analyze the translations at hand. Whether or not an *invariant core* can indeed be found will be discussed briefly at the end of this section.

What then, is Popovic's concept of variants and the invariant? Once again we can turn to Bassnett-McGuire for a summary:

Transformations, or variants, are those changes which do not modify the core of the meaning but influence the expressive form.... The invariant can be defined as that which exists in common between all existing translations of a single work. (Bassnett-McGuire, 27)

Problems arise when trying to separate a poem's "core meaning" from the "expressive form" that is used to communicate that meaning to the reader: one only has to think of Concrete poetry to understand that such a dichotomy is not always possible. Still, for the sake of this exercise it is not necessary to defend Popovic's theory nor is it necessary to utilize it as a whole. Instead, the term "core meaning" will be used, and should be understood, as referring to semantic elements only, not structural ones. His basic concepts of variants and the invariant can, however, still be used when examining the three Rilke translations in the next section, given that they can serve as a useful tool for comparison

regardless of Popovic's broader argument.

i) Application of the Variant/Invariant Concept

To be sure, Popovic's concept of variants has its limitations . For this reason the process of variant/ invariant differentiation has to be fine tuned somewhat. The comparison of the three translations at hand, consequently, will be approached in the following manner: passages of each poem which show significant variations from the other two translations will be marked in italics; minor variations will be left in original type, while those passages which are identical in all three TLTs will be set in bold. Thus Popovic's dichotomy will actually be changed into a trichotomy: the invariant will be split into two groups, namely those that are truly identical (bold) , and those that occupy the same semantic field (regular typeface), while the variants (renamed significant variants in the analysis) will be redefined to constitute passages in the text that occupy a different semantic field; the possibility exists that these passages might indeed affect the *invariant core* of the poem, a problem that will be left for another paper.

TLT 1: *Evening* (W. Arndt)

The evening is slowly changing garb,

Held for it by a fringe of old tree-tops;

Before your eyes, the territories part,

One that ascends to heaven, one that drops;

And leave you fully congruent with neither-

TLT 2 : *At Sundown* (A. Fleming)

Slowly the evening starts to change her raiments

for veils held up by rows of distant trees.

You watch how gradually the landscape's contours change,

some rising heavenward as others downward fall;

leaving you alone, to neither quite belonging,

TLT 3: *Evening* (M. D. Herter Norton)

The evening slowly changes the attire

held for it by a border of old trees;

you watch: and the lands part company with you,

one heavenward-ascending, one that falls;

and leave you, to neither quite belonging,

t quite as lightless as the silent house ,	nor quite as dark as houses silent keep ,	not quite so dark as the house that is silent ,
r as <i>assuredly boding last things</i> , either,	nor quite so sure <i>beseeking</i> the eternal	not quite so surely <i>conjuring</i> the eternal
what turns into star each night and mounts-	as that which nightly turns to star and rises ---	as that which turns to star each night and rises;
d leave to you (quite hopeless to unsnarl)	and leaving you (impossible to disentangle)	and leave you (<i>inexpressibly</i> to disentangle)
ur life <i>uneasy</i> , vast, to ripeness tending,	your life , fearful , gigantic and still ripening ,	your life , fearing, gigantic, ripening , that it
that it, now confined, now comprehending ,	which, now limited, now comprehending ,	becomes, now circumscribed, now comprehending ,
<i>ns now</i> to stone within you , now to star .	alternatingly becomes stone in you and star .	alternately stone in you and star .

Using this chart-like comparison of the TLTs and keeping in mind the SLT (see below) we can now proceed to a line by line examination of the translations. It should be noted, however, that the following analysis should by no means be considered exhaustive: given the scope of this exercise, it is more important to examine the different approaches used, the fact that they can be used at all, rather than to examine more complex topics of translation theory, e.g. do the TLT's capture the 'mood' of Rilke's poem. As mentioned, one of the reasons behind the various permutations will be discussed in the second part of this essay.

SLT: *Abend (R.M.Rilke)*

1. Der Abend wechselt langsam die Gewänder,
2. die ihm ein Rand von alten Bäumen hält;
3. du schaust : und von dir scheiden sich die Länder,
4. ein himmelfahrendes und eins, das fällt;
5. und lassen dich, zu keinem ganz gehörend,
6. nicht ganz so dunkel wie das Haus, das schweigt,

7. nicht ganz so sicher Ewiges beschwörend
8. wie das, was Stern wird jede Nacht und steigt-
9. und lassen dir (unsäglich zu entwirrn)
10. dein Leben bang und riesenhaft und reifend,
11. so dass es, bald begrenzt und bald begreifend,
12. abwechselnd Stein in dir wird und Gestirn.

Line 1:

The invariant (IV): evening; slowly

Significant Variant (SV): TLT 2 assigns the feminine to evening (possessive adjective "her")

Comment: with the exception of TLT 2's feminization, all three TLTs evoke similar imagery.

Line 2:

IV: held;for; tree

SV: TLT 2 specifies location using the adjective *distant* when referring to the tree line; TLT 2: introduces the term *veil*

Comment TLT 1 and TLT 3 use very similar imagery; TLT 2's use of "veil" is directly connected to the feminization of the evening in line 3.

Line 3:

IV: n.a..

SV: TLT 1's use of the eye imagery

Comment: here the three TLTs go their separate ways. Although the imagery used is very much similar on a semantic level in all three texts, TLT 2 describes a passive change of the landscape, whereas the other two texts endow the landscape -imagery with a more active role since it is the landscape that actually does the changing.

Line 4:

IV: ascend; heaven

SV: TLT 2 uses the plural (some, others) out of necessity since in line 3 he refers to the "contours".

Comment: all three TLTs use similar imagery

Line 5:

IV: leave; you

SV: TLT 1's use of congruent

Comment: while TLT 2 and 3 chose similar semantic lines, TLT 1 lessens the notion of isolation through the exclusion of the word "alone".

Line 6:

IV: quite, silent; house

SV: TLT 2 - keep

Comment: little variation on semantic level with the exception of the SV.

Line 7:

IV: n.a.

SV: see comment below

Comment: Rilke's line 7 " nicht ganz so sicher Ewiges beschwörend" obviously poses some significant problems to the translators; hence, the great degree of variation between the three TLTs. While TLT 2 and 3 utilize "eternal" to translate "Ewiges", a literal translation so to speak, TLT 1 goes into a different translation by equivocating between the concept of "eternal" and the phrase "boding last things".

Line 8:

IV: turn; star; night

SV: n.a.

Comment: No significant variations between the three TLTs.

Line 9:

IV: and; leave; you;

SV: TLT 3- inexpressibly

Comment: while all three translations are similar in construct and semantic content, TLT 3 chooses the adverb "inexpressibly" ; mirroring more closely Rilke's "unsäglich".

Line 10:

IV: your; life; ripe

SV: TLT 1- uneasy

Comment: TLT's use similar structure, with the exception of TLT 3 which uses line 10 as a lead-in to line 11.

Line 11:

IV: now; now; comprehending

SV: n.a.

Comment: very similar semantic references in all three TLT's; TLT 3 differs only through its continuance between lines 10 and 11

Line 12:

IV: stone; you;, star

SV: TLT 1 - Turns; now

Comment: again, the three translations are quite similar in structure, and using a similar semantic field. Note that TLT 1 changes the tense of the line somewhat through the use of the word "now"

ii) Conclusion:

Through the examinations of the three TLTs at hand it should be clear that variation can and does indeed occur when translating a poem. At times these variations become significant enough to warrant speculation about whether or not there could be a qualitative difference between TLTs . Any such speculation would, however, exceed the scope of this exercise. Instead let us focus on Popovic's concept of *invariant core*

Referring back to the comparative chart of the three TLTs, as well as the line by line analysis that antecedes it, we can recognize that great percentages of the texts do indeed resemble each other to one degree or another. Although the percentage of IV is relatively small, it is not much smaller than that of the SVs. The three TLT's middle-ground seems to be those passages that, while varying in syntax and structure to one degree or another, still seem to employ the same semantic field when transposing SL to the TL. This in turn allows for a favorable view of Popovic's concept of *invariant core*: " basic, stable and constant" elements seem to be present in all three TLTs. Still , the existence of some form of *invariant core* does not negate the fact that a high degree of permutation is possible when turning an SLT into a TLT. One possible explanation for these permutations will now be discussed.

III. SLT vs. TLT: the Degrees of Variations

It would be impossible, given the nature of this exercise, to delve in great into length as to the theories that have arisen concerning the different approaches towards the translation of SLTs: a number of works exist that deal with this subject matter in a competent way¹. One line of argument which is possible to pursue, however, is the comparison between literary interpretation and the process of translation. Although this comparison is not an original one², I will never-the-less touch on some of its aspects, in order to put the problems of variation in translations into some perspective. The field of literary interpretation is, as we know, flourishing mainly due to one factor; that is, any given text can (and should) be interpreted from a variety of angles. The ambiguities inherent in any language only get magnified when that language is used to produce a piece of text. Add to this the strata of information that the author confers consciously or subconsciously, e.g. historical perspectives, conscious author intentions, biographical influences etc..., and the student of literature is left with innumerable tools with which he/she can interpret any piece of work. Still, it should be qualified that the likelihood that student X (X) chooses one or the other interpretation is to some degree limited by the information that he/she already possesses. Thus, if X wants to conduct a psychological analysis of Text A, the result will be shaped by the amount and type of information on psychology that X has managed to amass. Further, if X, for example, has made a complete study of C.G. Jung's work, chances are high that his/her interpretation of Text A will be influenced by Jungian ideas. In short, the experience and information that X brings to text A, will influence his/her understanding, hence his/her interpretation, of that text.

Compare this situation with that of the translator and we will find a number of similarities. When the translator (T) is confronted with a translation, his/her ability to translate this text is limited to the amount of information about the target language (TL) and the source language (SL) that T possess at the time the translation occurs. However, this information is not limited to the purely semantic realm. If, for example, T is required to translate a poem, he must

1 For a competent introduction into the problems of translating poetry turn to Andre Lefevere, *Translating Poetry : Seven Strategies and a Blueprint* (Assen: Von Gorcum, 1975).

2 See James Holmes, 'Forms of Verse Translation and the Translation of Verse Form', in James Holmes (ed.), *The Nature of Translation* (TheHague: Mouton, 1970).

posses the ability to deal with the structures that are inherent to that art form. Since this particular ability entails complex cognitive processes (which in turn allows for a great degree of variability) it should be clear that the TLT will be shaped by T's accumulation of information, much like the interpretation of Text A was in the above example. A case can, thus, be made for the claim that the variation in TLTs is in essence not much different than the ones found in the secondary literature of any given piece of text. Both translator and literary interpreter act as a 'filter' through which information passes, gets manipulated and then is released .

IV. Conclusion

Given the three separate translations of Rilke's poem that were examined here, the following basic conclusions can be drawn: first, translators have to work within a given semantic field in which parameters are set by the SLT at hand; second, some variation is inevitable due to the nature of the process itself. From these two conclusion a paradox emerges, since, on the one hand, the consistencies, exemplified by the invariant that we observed in the TLTs, seem to indicate that a flawless, or absolute translation should be tenable, while, on the other, the variants indicate that such a translation can never exist. This paradox, in turn, mirrors the old debate of whether translation is an art, and hence non-reducible, or a science , a definition which implies the possibility of a verifiable method of translation. The question remains unresolved, however, analyses of the sort exemplified in this paper may shed some light on this issue.

Texts Cited:

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