

The Sights and Sounds of "The Stone Sleeper"

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Summary

Mak Dizdar's poetry is abundant with versatile properties of linguistic expression, at all levels of analysis: phonetic, morphological, syntactic... His word plays never denote aesthetic function only; rather, they always serve a deeper purpose of sound realization and semantic function. His verses consist of suggestive phonetic expressions, thus making the process of translation even more complex. This paper offers a brief look into the translation of Dizdar's verse by Francis R. Jones.

Key words: Mak Dizdar, *Stone Sleeper*, translation, Francis R. Jones.

It is disputed what aim a translator should propose to himself in dealing with his original. [...] On one side it is said that the translation ought to be such "that the reader should, if possible, forget that it is a translation at all, and be lulled into the illusion that he is reading an original work—something original (if the translation be in English) from an English hand." The real original is in this case, it is said, "taken as a basis on which to rear a poem that shall affect our countrymen as the original may be conceived to have affected its natural hearers." On the other hand, [yet another translator] declares that he "aims at

precisely the opposite: to retain every peculiarity of the original, so far as he is able, with the greater care the more foreign it may happen to be; so that it may never be forgotten that he is imitating, and imitating in a different material.” [and that...] the translator’s “first duty is a historical one, to be faithful”, [...] but the question at issue between them is, in what faithfulness consists.¹

This is how Matthew Arnold (1822-1888), an English poet, literary critic and translator speaks of translation in a text on the translation of Homer, published as long ago as 1861. Essentially, this to this day remains the key dilemma: to what extent has a text been *foreignized* or *domesticated*.

Lawrence Venuti speaks of the translator’s *invisibility*, created exactly because the translators are translating into a *fluent* English, in order to produce an idiomatic and *readable* text, thus creating an illusion of transparency, so it is said that “a translated text, whether prose or poetry, fiction or nonfiction, is judged acceptable by most publishers, reviewers and readers when it reads fluently, when the absence of any linguistics or stylistic peculiarities makes it seem transparent, giving the appearance that it reflects the foreign writer’s personality or intention or the essential meaning of the foreign text. The target texts produced in such a way are not transparent but give just the “illusion” of being transparent or natural in the target language.”²

Venuti considers the translator’s invisibility to be in direct relation with two translation strategies *foreignization* and *domestication*,³ meaning, as Schleiermacher stated, that the translator faces “two possibilities: either the translator (i) leaves the author in peace as much as possible and moves the reader toward him; or (ii) he leaves the reader in peace as much as possible and moves the writer toward him.”⁴ By choosing the

¹ This citation was taken from a collection of analytical texts and commentaries on translation, originally written in English, French, German and Latin, in the period between the birth of Cicero in 106 BC and the death of classical German philologist and translator Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, in 1931. Andre Lefevre, *Translation, History, Culture*, London i New York: Routledge, 1992, p. 68.

² Lawrence Venuti, *Translator’s Invisibility: A History of Translation*, London and New York: Routledge, 1995, p. 1.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 19-23.

⁴ Schleiermacher, cited in Venuti, *op. cit.*, p. 101.

first option, the translator chooses foreignization, which pressures the reader into leaving his own linguistic and cultural values in favour of meeting the foreign, while, by choosing the second option, the translator chooses domestication, which entails an ethnocentric reduction of a foreign text to the cultural values of the target language. Venuti alone says that foreignization is favourable to an extent to which it represents a restraint to the ethnocentric violence of the translation, as a strategic cultural intervention directed against the hegemony of the English speaking area of the world and unequal cultural exchange. However, he emphasizes the need of constructing a theory and practice of translation which would resist the cultural values of the dominant target language, and emphasizes the linguistic and cultural differences of the foreign text.

Perhaps the most illustrative example of the dilemma whether to *foreignize* or *domesticize* are the works considered by many speakers of the source language to be untranslatable; texts whose content is seemingly impossible to be expressed in another language or culture, dominant or not. One such example is the collection of poems *The Stone Sleeper* (*Kameni spavač*) by Mak Dizdar.

The collection of poems *The Stone Sleeper* was first published in 1966, and only a few years before his death, Mak Dizdar handed in a newer version of the collection to his publisher, which differs from the first edition in that it does not contain the last cycle of poems. The second edition was published in 1973 and Mak Dizdar died in 1971.

Just as is the case in all literature, Mak Dizdar's work is closely connected to the language and culture of his motherland. It can be said that the theme of Medieval Bosnia is at the very core of this collection of poems, both thematically and lexically. That means that the poems are abundant with archaic expressions, which even the native speakers of Bosnian find difficult to understand. This is but one example which, alongside many other characteristics of Dizdar's layered language containing word plays (*mozak zarobljen u srce*) and some other cultural elements (namely, *stećak*, i.e. a medieval Bosnian tombstone), will make many readers of poetry in Bosnia say it is simply *untranslatable*.

Of course, opinion that nothing is untranslatable also exists, and, as a result of such conviction, Francis R. Jones' translation of *The Stone Sleeper* came to light in 1999.⁵ On the collection of poems, the translator

⁵ *The Stone Sleeper*, transl. Francis R. Jones, Sarajevo: Did, 1999.

stated the following: “Mak Dizdar’s *Stone Sleeper* is not only a work of verse. It is also an act of spiritual scholarship, a journey into a period and people – the mystery of Medieval Bosnia – about which no two historians agree. This is a journey which only a scholar-poet could have undertaken, for only a scholar can find the way to this land and only a poet can understand what lies there. Dizdar’s poetry speaks directly to the reader. But if he or she is to appreciate the full numinous richness of Dizdar’s landscape, we felt we should also guide the reader along the paths that he took as a scholar”.⁶ In this way, Jones explained the complexity of the task he was facing.

The best way to illustrate some of the challenges the translator faced is through examples of Dizdar’s poetry in this collection. It should be noted, however, that this short analysis of the translation will not look at the semantic aspects of the translation, since that would go beyond the scope as indicated in the title. It will focus strictly on the *sights* and *sounds* as important elements of Dizdar’s poetry and how those elements were transposed in the English translation of these emblematic poems.⁷

Kolo bola

Koliko kola od dola do dola
Koliko bola od kola do kola

Koliko jada od grada do grada
Koliko greba od brega do brega

Koliko krvi od usudnih rana
Koliko smrti do sudenog dan

Koliko kola od dola do dola
Koliko bola od kola do kola

Kolo do kola od bola do bola

⁶ “Translator’s Afterword”, *The Stone Sleeper*, *op. cit.*, p. 242.

⁷ Both the original poems and the translations taken from *The Stone Sleeper*, *op. cit.*

In his book about Mak Dizdar's *Stone Sleeper*, Enes Duraković states that this poem semantically and stylistically resembles a miniature; that it is reduced to the purity of speech of archetypal symbolical play, without any relation to the material world, and that implies absence of the baroque-like expression. The value of such poems, Duraković further elaborates, lies in their rhythmic and melodic foundation, rather than in descriptive-picturesque richness of the verse. Bitterness of human play of *kolo of sorrow* comes to life in "heavy accords of alliterated clusters of consonants and dark sequences of assonated back vowels (*a, o, u*) in a brisk, monotonous rhythm of unavoidable steps of death". Rhythmical structure of the poem is made more prominent by "a caesura after the fifth syllable, seen not only in the sequence of verses, but within the same verse. Lyrical parallelisms appear throughout the poem, in all three forms (anaphora, epistrophe, symploce), which in many ways, almost onomatopoeically resemble traditional, monotonous laments".⁸

Translation:

Kolo of sorrow

How long the kolo from hollow to hollow
How long the sorrow from kolo to kolo

How long the dread from stead to stead
How long the tombs from coomb to coomb

How long the blood we are judged to pay
How long the deaths till the judgement day

How long the kolo from hollow to hollow
How long the sorrow from kolo to kolo

Kolo to kolo from sorrow to sorrow

⁸ Enes Duraković, *Govor i šutnja tajanstva – Pjesničko djelo Maka Dizdara*, second edition, Sarajevo: Oko, 2005, pp. 169-170.

Even upon first reading of the translation, it is evident that the rhythmic and melodic structure of the poem has been preserved. Moreover, the phonetic challenge of maintaining the same dark atmosphere of the poem in translation has been achieved through the choice of words semantically matching the original (for example, *hollow*), but, at the same time, containing the alliterated clusters of voiceless consonants (especially plosives and velars) within the same verse (e.g. *how long the tombs from coomb to coomb*). The translator also achieved a caesura within every verse, but inconsistently, after the fifth or fourth syllable. That, however, does not affect the chant-like rhythm of the poem. The three lyrical parallelisms can also be seen in translation (anaphora: *how long* – beginning of every verse, epiphora: *hollow to hollow and kolo to kolo* – at the end of first and fourth stanza and symploce, in the middle of first and fourth stanzas, connecting the anaphora and symploce: *the kolo from hollow and the sorrow from kolo*).

Since there is no equivalent in the English language for *kolo*, the translator decided to *borrow* it as it appears in the original text. This is a well-recognised technique, usually applied to words that are culture-specific, in the interest of compactness.⁹ Any attempt to provide a translation equivalent would have reflected negatively on the rhythm of the poem – it would have misbalanced it considerably. Naturally, such a choice requires an explanation, which the translator duly provides, and states the following in his notes: “The *kolo* is the South-Slav round dance. Carvings on the tombs show that it has remained unchanged since medieval times”.¹⁰ This is therefore a clearly justified choice.

“Dažd” or “Rain” is one of the most beautiful poems in this collection:

Dažd

Trebalo bi opet naučiti
da slušamo kako dažd pada pada

⁹ Nigel Armstrong, *Translation, Linguistics, Culture A French–English Handbook*, Clevedon, Buffalo, Toronto: Multilingual Matters Ltd., 2005, pp. 153-156.

¹⁰ F. Jones, *The Stone Sleeper*, *op. cit.*, p. 249.

Trebalo bi se odkameniti
i poći bez osvrtnja kroz kamenu kapiju ovog kamenog grada

Trebalo bi ponovo pronaći
izgubljene staze od one plave trave

Trebalo bi u obilju bilja
zagrliti panične makove i mrave

Trebalo bi se iznova umiti
i sniti u jasnim kapima ozorne rose

Trebalo bi onesvijestiti se
u tamnim vlasima neke travne kose

Trebalo bi načas stati
sa suncem svojim i sjenkom svojom stasati

Trebalo bi se konačno sastati
sa već davno odbjeglih vlastitim srcem

Trebalo bi se odkameniti
i proći bez osvrtnja kroz kamenu kapiju ovog kamenog grada

Trebalo bi htjeti
i svu noć bdjeti slušajući kako dažd pravedni pada pada pada

Again, Duraković states that the onomatopoeic sound of rain in the poem creates an illusion of reality of the world appearing from the memories of the lyrical subject, only to return and disappear in that same sound. Duraković explains that “the beneficial, omnipresent and life-giving light” from the seventh stanza disperses in euphonic sounds of fricatives (*s, z*), and sonorants (*m, n, lj, j*), as well as in syntagmatic coupling of words, such as *obilje bilja*, *ozorna rosa* and *plave trave*.¹¹ Even the word *dažd*, containing the clusters of voiced consonants (*d, ž*) is

¹¹ E. Duraković, *op.cit.*, p. 187-188.

relived in this poem and used instead the contemporary expression *kiša*, and gives the feeling of both peace and strength to the sleeper who is trying to grasp life, rain and the light one more time.

Rain

We need to learn again
to listen to the rain the rain

We need to disenstone ourselves
and eyes straight to walk unwavering through the city gate

We need to uncover the lost paths
that pass through the blond grass

We need to caress the poppies and ants
panicking in this plenty of plants

We need to wash ourselves anew
and dream in clean drops of dawn dew

We need to faint away
between the dark tresses of grassy hair

We need to stand a while beside our sun
and grow as tall as our shadow

We need to meet our own hearts again
that fled so long ago

We need to disenstone ourselves
and eyes straight to walk unwavering through this stone city's
stone gate

We need to wish with all our might
and listen all night to the rain the rain the righteous rain

It is noticeable in translation that the onomatopoeic sound is achieved in translation not by the use of the verb *to pour* or *to fall*, like in the original text (*pada, pada*), but rather by the repetition of the word *rain*. In this way, the translator maintained the same tone and rhythm of the poem. Alliteration of the sonorant sounds (e.g. *dream in clean drops of dawn dew*) works in favour of the effect achieved in the original text – a want of the dead to live again. In that sense, even more striking in the target language is the use of words whose prefixes denote a change, or liberation from something, which can be exemplified by two verbs – *odkameniti* – *disenstone*, *bez osvrtnja* – *unwavering*.

Interestingly, in the fourth stanza, the translator replaced the order of verses:

We need to caress the poppies and ants
panicking in this plenty of plants,

while the original reads

Trebalo bi u obilju bilja
zagrliti panične makove i mrave

This resulted in even greater effect of the poet's intention to represent the joy of life, since alliteration of the voiceless plosive /p/ leaves the impression of flourishing of life and movement of all things living. Again a justified shift.

Just like the poet, Jones chose to translate the syntagmatic phrases so that they do not form the standard collocations in the contemporary English: *obilje bilja* – *plenty of plants* (alliteration of plosives achieved in the translation, just like in the original text), *ozorna rosa* – *drops of dawn dew* (assonance of the vowel /o/ in the original text, alliteration of the voiced plosive /d/ in the target language), etc.

The archaic expression *dažd* is still present in some other South Slavic languages, notably in Macedonian, but the only translation equivalent in English is rain. Still, the translator wittingly uses the repetition of the word and preserves the intensity of the falling rain throughout the poem, but he also grasps the moment when the sleeper's

vivid memory of life, rain and sun slowly fade away. That is evident in the last stanza where the translator achieves the same peaceful closure of the poem by moving the adjectival premodification of the noun phrase *the righteous rain* to the very end of the poem:

We need to wish with all our might
and listen all night to the rain the rain the righteous rain.

Mak Dizdar's poetry is abundant with euphonic properties of linguistic expression, at all levels of analysis: phonetic, morphological, syntactic... His word plays never denote aesthetic function only; rather, they always serve a deeper purpose of sound realization and semantic function. His verses consist of suggestive phonetic expressions, thus making the process of translation even more complex. Francis R. Jones' translation shows that he is not only able to understand the source text in all its levels and in all the complex language layers of Dizdar's poetry E. Duraković spoke of, but also his ability to skilfully manipulate the phonetic characteristics of the English language with the semantic challenges of the original.

Sources:

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