A Waste of Shame

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This is a study focusing on six topological variants of William Shakespeare’s Sonnet 129; the concept of “topologies of culture” is borrowed from George Steiner’s After Babel, and refers to all kinds of transformations that a text – a cultural artefact for that matter – can go through, as a result of various perspectives upon it; topologies thus include paraphrase, translation, parody, burlesque, lampoon, pastiche, adaptation, imitation, parallelism, etc. Our six (types of) variants are: the original sonnet proper, a film that takes its title from the first line, a translation – in fact, two versions – into modern English, a prose translation into Romanian, criticism on the sonnet (five approaches), a Romanian literary version, and its re-translation into English; all together (and many other potential ones) are supposed to provide a complex picture of the meanings that can be extracted from the original.

Keywords: sonnet; Shakespeare; topologies of culture; translation; re-translation; interpretation; irreversibility.

Let us begin by pointing out – and the reader might have to just take our word for it – that we had decided about this title (also required by the magazine’s thematic issue) before knowing about three novels of this title (a SF 1965 one by Australian author George Reginald Turner, a 1967 one by Edward T. McNamara, and a 2001 detective novel by Jim Lusby) or about the BBC’s one hour and 24’ production “A Waste of Shame” (which we then viewed on the Internet: the story of the sonneteer’s life between 1592 – with the death of Hamnet, aged 11, in 1596 and the London plague of 1606 – and 1609, marking the publication of the sonnets by Thomas Thorpe, also featured in the film, and Master Shakespeare’s “return home”, to Stratford, where he died seven years later). Shakespeare is embodied on the screen by Rupert Graves, and the other characters include “the fair youth” (William, third Earl of Pembroke), a promiscuous dark woman of a French-African (Algerian?) origin, named Lucy, John Shakespeare – the father, Anne Hathaway, Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, Richard Burbage (friend and famous fellow actor, owner of the Globe) and others. This movie about Shakespeare’s life during the writing of his sonnets—with Sonnet 129 thematically at the centre—, covering the writer’s illness and cure and much about London pubs and brothels at the end of the sixteenth century (“the waste of shame”) may be taken as one of the topological variants of this sonnet: six variants, in case we think of just one Romanian translation as emblematic, but there are at least twenty, to which one should add other film adaptations (see Net), pop songs (composer Hallam London, for instance) or even, believe it or not, a translation into the DNA code, made at the University of Cambridge and which we certainly have no access to.

Our purpose in this paper is to have a look at the other variants, by using George Steiner’s concept concerning “topologies of culture” in his 1975 After Babel. Steiner’s theory is based upon the assumption that all communication is a form of translation on one hand, and, on the other, rather paradoxically, that real translation between languages is impossible because the original meaning is always lost: the translated text is tainted by the translator’s own cultural beliefs, knowledge, and attitudes. He also views translation as a hermeneutical task, and Steiner’s systematic hermeneutic translation theory is based on a model comprizing four movements: initiative trust, aggression, incorporation, and restitution or reciprocity (the restoration of equilibrium between the original text and its translation, an equilibrium otherwise made vulnerable by the translation
itself); trust and restitution honour the source text, while aggression and incorporation benefit the translator. Here Steiner also writes about “transfiguration”, referring to those rare, ideal cases in which the intrinsic weight and radiance of the translation eclipses that of the source.

In Chapter 6, “Topologies of Culture”, Steiner borrows his concept from mathematics, where topology is that branch that deals with the fundamental properties of shapes (or forms?), which remain the same although the figure may be bent out of shape (from plane geometry to space geometry). For example, a rectangle (like a sheet of paper) may be turned into a cylinder; if a shape (an animal) is drawn on the flexible surface of the rectangular sheet of paper and this paper is distorted, certain aspects of the figure remain the same, such as distances between points as well as the number of points or the area of the shape, but the configuration, the relations of the separate points to each other get changed; in a translated text, the fundamentals (subject, plot, characters, relationships, message...) remain the same, but it is rendered in a form that makes it intelligible for a new audience; the topos, or core, of the original has to remain the same. Quoting Umberto Eco and his essays on translation (probably the ones included in *Mouse or Rat? Translation as Negotiation, On Ugliness or Experiences in Translation...*), Steiner believes in functional equivalence, i.e. suitable equivalents at all levels of communication that will provoke an equivalent effect in the target language; a good translator must generate the same effect aimed at by the original (an almost impossible task if we think of the multitude of effects obtained in time and space).

So, topologies of culture (or topologies of literature for that matter) are used in the sense of variants or variations on the same topic and include paraphrase, adaptation (novel into film, poem into music, drama into ballet...), imitation, influence, parallelism, parody, pastiche, translation itself, i.e. all types of arrangements and re-arrangements of a number of components sending all to a common kernel or origin.

In this view, the other topological variants of our set are Shakespeare’s Sonnet 129, its translation into plain modern English prose, a prose translation into Romanian of *the words and sentences of the original text*, one or several Romanian versions of the sonnet, the retranslation of one such sonnet into English, and the practical criticism applied to it (criticism as another topological form of translation) — and, again, here we may have numberless perspectives and approaches, so that our six variants are, in fact, several dozen variants (which we do not attempt to cover).

Therefore, in this order or other, here is “one of the (...) most completely powerful sonnets in our literature” (John Symonds, 1902: 153) or “the most merciless passage in English literature” (Bernard Shaw, 1910: 849). Here is Sonnet 129 (from Original 1609 Quarto):

“The expense of Spirit in a waste of shame
Is lust in action, and till action, lust
Is perjured, murderous, bloody full of blame,
Savage, extreme, rude, cruel, not to trust,
Injoyd no sooner but despised straight,
Past reason hunted, and no sooner had
Past reason hated as a swallowed bait,
On purpose laid to make the taker mad.
Made in pursuit and in possession so,
Had, having, and in quest, to bane extreme,
A bliss in proofe and proud and [sic] very wo,
Before a joy proposed behind a dreame,

All this the world well knowes yet none knowes well,
To shun the heauen that leads men to this hell.”

Then, two simplified “translations” into modern English:

“The wasteful, shameful squandering of energy – that is what lust in action is. And until the real action, lust
is dishonest, murderous, violent, blameworthy, savage, extreme, crude, cruel, and untrustworthy; lust is hated as
soon as (or sooner than) it has been enjoyed, and pursued beyond reason; and as soon as it is bad, it is hated
beyond reason, like the bait swallowed by a fish, offered with the intent of making him who takes it crazy; the
taker is insane in pursuing one’s lust and mad in possessing the object of lust; going to extremes in having bad it,
in the having of it, and in seeking to have it; a blissful sensation when being bad, yet a total sorrow after all;
before having it, an expected joy; after having it, it seems like a bad dream, a lost ideal. Everyone certainly knows
all this about lust, but still no one quite knows how to shun the hope of satisfaction that leads men to this hellish
madness.”

and Marvin Krimm’s:

“The use of one’s vital force in a shameful act
is lust in action; and, leading up to consummation, lust
is lying, murderous, bloody, full of blame,
savage, extreme, rude, cruel, not to be trusted.
As soon as enjoyed it is immediately despised;
insanely hunted, and no sooner had
past reason hated as a swallowed bait
on purpose laid to make the taker mad.
Mad in pursuit and in possession so;
bad, having, and in quest to have extreme;
blissful in the moment of proof, but afterwards a mere woe;
before, an anticipated joy; in retrospect, nothing but a dream.
All this the world well knows, yet none knows well
to shun the heaven that leads men to this hell. (“Shakespeare’s Sonnet #129” page)

These two texts might well be regarded both as paraphrases of the original and as re-readings
of a four-hundred years old text; critical re-readings in their own way, preparing the literary critical
perspectives proper.

First, Sonnet 129 in the context of the 154 sonnet sequence which, had Shakespeare not writ-
ten anything else, would be enough to ensure his immortality, though – some critics claim – he
never took this form of poetry seriously, and the sonnets can be read as parodies of the sonnet
cycles that preceded them, such as Sir Philip Sidney – *Astrophel and Stella* (1591), Samuel Daniel –
*Dolia* (1592), Michael Drayton – *Ideas Mirror* (1594) and Edmund Spenser – *Amoretti* (1595),
all of them indebted to some extent to the conventions established, more than two centuries be-
fore, by Petrarch in his *Canzoniere*; which is probably why the sonnets were not incorporated into
Shakespeare’s official canon until 1790.

The sonnets were written beginning, perhaps, in 1592 or 1593, and were completed no later
than 1609, when the quarto volume of *Shakespeare’s Sonnets* was published by Thomas Thorpe,
which, though riddled with errors (see above), remains the basis for all modern editions. With
two or three exceptions, they follow the established English form of the sonnet: the fourteen
lines in iambic pentameter are grouped in three quatrains (abab, cdcd, efef) and a final couplet
(gg) which summarizes or generalizes the argument or theme developed in the quatrains. The se-
quence is made up of two groups: sonnets 1-126 focusing on the speaker’s friendship with a “fair
youth”, and sonnets 127-152 on his relationship with a “dark lady”; sonnets 153 and 154 are al-
legorical treatments of Greek epigrams referring to Cupid. A general feature of the whole se-
quence is the remarkable diversity of tone and mood, along with the complexity and ambiguity
of Shakespeare’s figurative language.

The 1609 volume is dedicated to Mr. W. H. – the fair youth, most likely — who could have been any of a number of persons hiding behind these initials: William Herbert, Henry Wriothe-
lesley, William Hall, Sir William Harvey, William Himself, i.e. Shakespeare, William Haughton,
William Hart, William Hatcliffe, Willie Hughes... As distinguished from the Fair Youth sequence, the Dark Lady sonnets (129 included) are more overtly sexual, going all the way to cynicism (130) or witty pornography (151); the dark lady herself has never been identified, though such persons as Mary Fitton, Emilia Lanier and others have been suggested.

 Appropriately enough, the themes of the sonnets are love, friendship, jealousy, hope, and despair, alongside with meditations on how all good and true things are fragile, how most of our beliefs are illusions, or on the consolations of art, on time and mutability; quite a few of them (among which 129) are bleak cries of emotional distress and spiritual exhaustion, providing a tragic portrait of human existence.

A second critical perspective would be that of comparing – thematically and in terms of vision – Sonnet 129 to other Shakespearean sonnets, to other works by Shakespeare, and to other texts in general, a job which might prove endless, but we will be choosy and sparse. We may first take sonnets 116 and 129 as a pair of Christian sonnets – Christian in terms of the harsh tenets of asceticism – that contrast heavenly love and hellish lust or the natural “lust” of sexual desire with the excesses of lust perpetrated in the name of the “Spirit” (“s” was capitalized in the quarto); and one may also look at sonnet 9, where the ideal youth “commits murderous shame upon himself”, or at Sonnet 147, where “Past cure I am, now Reason is past care, / And frantic-mad with ever-more unrest, / My thoughts and my discourse as mad mens are”, is closely reminiscent of “make the taker mad” in 129; in fact, the whole sonnet is on the same subject and theme expressed in the final couplet of 129: the whole world knows of lust’s power over reason, yet no one is smart enough to avert himself from the pleasures that grow and consume and possess and lead you to lust’s dark consequences. Thematic related – love and lust – are also sonnets 4, 21, and 130... Or take the exceeding rare impersonal tone in the sonnets in general, used only when the speaker seeks most defensively to deflect his words away from himself as in 129 and 94 (where the impersonal tone covers a deep-seated vulnerability: “For sweetest things turn sourest by their deeds; / Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds.”) And one may also see the distorted lust of Tarquin in “The Rape of Lucrece”, or Leontes in The Winter’s Tale and the sexual pessimism in Lear (IV.6.28-29: “There’s hell, there’s darkness, there’s the sulphurous pit, / Burning, scalding, stench, consumption, fie...”), Othello and Timon. And, broadening the perspective, we come upon Sidney’s Sonnet 31 (in Certain Sonnets, 1598), beginning: “Thout blind man’s mark, thou fool’s self-chosen snare...”; then Thomas Lodge’s “Rosalynde”, Robert Southwell’s “St. Peter’s Complaint”, or Thomas Watson’s “The Tears of Francie” (“O what life is it that lovers joy, / Wherein both pain and pleasure shrouded is...”) – all of them from the 1590s; or even this translation from Petronius by Ben Jonson: “Doing a filthy pleasure is, and short, / And done, we straight repent us from the sport...”

Thirdly, this “Lust Sonnet” would certainly welcome a Freudian interpretation, starting, probably, from the master’s explorations of the Libido as a relatively isolated phenomenon, i.e. lust outside a love relationship (significantly enough, the word “love” does not appear in the sonnet). In this vein, Marvin Krim sees the sonnet as a “candid description of the emotional troubles that people experience while engaging in it”. He also notices the “adjectival assault” that follows the Spirit and shame in the first line, with “spirit” probably meaning “semen”, “waste” as “excreta”, “lust” as shameful dissipation of body fluids (see also Helen Vendler noting Shakespeare’s “wish to define”, to denominate, as the speaker’s hopeless, yet heroic, effort to cure himself by this simple act), and with “a swallowed bait...” carrying a “smack of paranoid psychosis”; Krim also notices the imagery of capture and the obliteration of the self, death as a metaphor for orgasm and love as a malicious act of aggression with all the frightening fantasies associated with lust, including its conscious and unconscious pleasures and problems.

In his turn, William Kerrigan describes the sonnet as a representation of “sexual nausea”, while John Mackinnon Robertson touches biography as he considers it “an evident product of a neurotic person”(219). Another author (“2005-2013 douban.com”) looks at the first quatrain as having the feel of self-therapy, with the self-loathing speaker aware of his malady, i.e. insanity,
i.e. Foucault’s folie (Madness and Civilization), which is either pure madness that excludes all rational elements or impure madness – sage folie – as a “swallowed bait”; part of the truth of the speaker’s madness is the successful application of reason; and our Net author concludes that “it is in the limbo of madness that we finally catch a glimpse of hope for spiritual sublimation” – with Vater Sigmund in full agreement.

A little obliquely, Professor Irene Ogrizek considers it a “sonnet about sex addiction” (with addiction = malady); Shakespeare believes we forfeit our spirit (our soul) when we engage in addictive behaviour; the expense or price of addiction is paid with it. In this case, “waste” literally means that lives are wasted by addiction, and, symbolically, it refers to hell, associated with the infamous dark lady that had Shakespeare and others utterly intoxicated. In a cycle including the chase (anticipation), the consummation (imbibing), and the aftermath (remorse), the addict no sooner enjoys his drug when he starts to despise its consequences right away; however, beyond all reason, he continues to hunt for it, and again, as he consumes it, he hates it beyond all reason. And Professor Ogrizek has the example of drug addicts in her city – many of them like herself, i.e. women, which makes the whole thing tragically ironic.

Next (fourthly?), since this is a text written more than four hundred years ago (when English was a slightly different language), a linguistic-philological explanatory criticism is in order (and not just for foreign readers, like ourselves). Thus: expense = squandering, riotous and thoughtless extravagance; spirit = vital energy, inner vitality, life-giving force within the psyche; a waste of shame = a desert of shameful moral decay; action = physical intercourse; till action = until it achieves its goal; bloody = blood-stained (as distinct from “bloody” = “very” of present-day English); full of blame = guilty, full of fault; savage = cruel, immoral, devoid of all civilized values; extreme = going to great lengths, exceeding all boundaries of reasonable behaviour; rude = coarse, brutish, crude; enjoyed = experienced; straight = immediately; past reason = beyond the control of reason; a bliss in proof = an ecstatic sensation while experienced; a very woe = an absolute, extreme sorrow; all this = all this catalogue of woe and disgust (see also “shakespeares-sonnets” site of Oxquarry Books Ltd.).

Finally, as a formal-critical continuation of the above, poet and critic Reginald Shepherd (Blog: “Speech, Meter, and Meaning in Shakespeare’s Sonnet 129”), after noting that “lust” in line 2 is the grammatical subject of the next ten lines, all in a tone moving from explosive rage to the philosophical resignation of the couplet, with variations of the regular iambic pattern in lines 4, 9, and 10, has this to say on his topic:

“...Sonnet 129 exemplifies the ways in which the tension between metrical pattern and speech rhythm can be a source of energy and a mode of making meaning (...) / From the very beginning, the speaker / is trapped, and unhappy about his entrapment, and his language reflects that. Though they can certainly be scanned as iambic pentameter, the first three lines (...) have four heavy stresses; the fourth (...) has five such heavy stresses. The second quatrain’s lines scan more easily, but the stresses are very heavy, highlighting the emphatic nature of the utterance. And the first line of the third quatrain starts with a trochee (...), / and / the line after that begins with a spondee (...) The last two lines of the third quatrain scan more easily, but throughout the poem both the heavy punctuation and the piling-up of short phrases serve to break up and agitate the metrical pattern, constantly forcing the reader to stop and start again (...). Through these three quatrains, the speaker has been immersed in his dilemma, caught up in the coils of ‘lust’ (...). / The predominance of short, heavily stressed words, the heavy punctuation, the metrical substitution (...) works to break up the meter and to act out the speaker’s agitated state of mind (...). In the final couplet, the sonnet’s volta or turn, however, he steps back (...), and we have a turn of mind; the situation has not changed, but the speaker’s relationship to it has... He is no longer in the midst of the experience, but now looks at it from outside. / And thus / (...) the rhythm even out (...) and the meter scans perfectly.”

The remaining components of our topological set are three translations into and from Romanian; the first one is a “faithful” (between inverted commas principally because the very important formal features of the English sonnet are completely ignored) translation of Sonnet 129:
„Dorința trupului – o irosire
A spiritului adormit, sperjură,
Sălbatică, și dincolo de fire
Nerușinată, ce-o-mplinești cu ură,
De tine însuți dezgustat; o nadă
A bestiei ce nu-ți ascultă mintea,
Prostește înghițită, stând dovadă
Smintelii ce te-mpinge înaintea
Pierzaniei: avînd, să n-ai; o vrere
Stîrnită de o dulce așteptare
Urmată de extaz, apoi durere:
Neantul absolut, minciuna care
Te duce-n iad, știi bine, da-i ești rob,
Si o urmezi ascultător, neghiboh.”

( România literară, nr. 38, 25.09.2009; see also bis site "Atelier literar")

All kinds of comments and observations could be made here, concerning, mostly, misunderstandings and distortions (which are not as numerous as in many of the other versions we managed to lay hands on), but the best criticism we can think of is a rough re-translation into English (made, obviously, against the background of all the knowledge accumulated so far from the other topological variants):

“The body’s desire – a squandering
Of the slumbering spirit, perjured,
Savage, and beyond nature,
Shameless, as you hatefully take it,
Disgusted with yourself; a bait
Of the beast that would not listen to reason,
Foolishly swallowed, a living proof
Of the madness that pushes you before
Your own extinction: having, to have not; a wish
Born out of sweet expectation
Followed by ecstasy, then woe:
Sheer nothingness, a lie that leads you
To hell, as you well know, but as a slave
You follow it obediently, senselessly.”

With the beginning and the essential final couplet almost mercilessly distorted, this version, put side by side with the original, might tempt one into believing he is looking at two different sonnets, that are comparable to some extent in subject and theme; and this is the re-translation of a version that is relatively closer to the Shakespearean text than most or many of the other ones (including the highly praised Boșca and Tomozei ones, and even Andrei Ion Deleanu’s rigorously critical translation), some of which would not even stand the test of such an experiment, as they are often gross misunderstandings of the original meanings (which is why some remarkable translators, like Ion Frunzetti for instance, avoided this sonnet).

Let us mention, though only in passing, that we are fully aware of the irreversibility of any translation, i.e. a backwards (re-)translation of a foreign text, when the source language becomes, by inversion, the target language; even the simplest prose text, once translated and re-translated, cannot perfectly match the original, and the situation is more truly so in the case of fiction and, especially, of poetry. And a Shakespearean example is always handy: if you did not know the original title, you would probably (re-)translate Dupa faptă și răsplătă by “one good turn deserves another”, or “as the work, so the pay”, or even “tit for tat”. Even so, with this experiment, we have a rather completely suggestive picture of the topological set we had in mind from the very beginning, because, just as criticism becomes, at its various moments of coming into the world of letters an integral part of the work it otherwise completes and consolidates, translation – all translation – has to be considered as a component of the translated or retranslated text; around one single such text – Shakespeare’s Sonnet 129 – we have four translations into English and Romanian, one film, and five critical “translations” that may help – one hopes – in providing a fuller understanding of the initial text; and thus, instead of a sonnet’s meanings, we have a whole universe of meanings initiated by it.

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Film:
“A Waste of Shame: The Mystery of Shakespeare and His Sonnets”, an 84' BBC drama (biopic), screenplay by William Boyd, directed by John Mckay, with Rupert Graves as “Master Shakespeare”.
