

The Plexus of Translation and Mythology

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Abstract. The article scrutinizes the rendering of the myths and their elements, such as mythologemes and mythological characters, in translation. The intricacies of interpreting and translating *the mythological other* encoded in a literary text are showcased by contrastive translation analyses of works by two prominent Ukrainian authors (Lesya Ukrainka and Taras Prokhasko), representing different epochs (the classic and the modern Ukrainian literature, respectively), and their corresponding (re-) translations into the German and English languages.

Keywords: translation, myth, mythologeme, retranslation, domestication, adaptive translation.

Mythology and mythological thinking are at the core of translation as the concept. People have been *translating* myths into reality as well as from one language into the other since time immemorial. “Myths are cultural accounts of major events that typically happened in the remote past of that culture, when the world was different to today” [3:p.10]. Thus, translating myths involves sharing cultural narratives of the past, the present and the future, and aspiring to connect the dots in the cultural history of humankind. That is mythology in translation operates on both intra-lingual and inter-lingual levels, which results in international awareness with some mythologemes and mythological characters. The following article focuses mainly on the study of inter-lingual level of translation of mythological concepts and elements present in literary works.

Ukrainian mythology is the motif of works by many Ukrainian authors both modern and classic. The fact of its lesser international spread then, for example, ancient Greek mythology, poses an additional challenge for translating works with Ukrainian mythological universe components into any other European language. It is worth noting that the premise of this article accords with G. Steiner’s statement: “There are no “small languages”. Each of the twenty thousand or more distinct tongues thought, by ethnolinguistics, to have at some time been spoken on the planet, generates its particular mapping of imaginative, explanatory and existential possibilities” [9:p.2] We believe that particularity of any culture and language can generate a common ground for intellectual exchange. D. Bellos in his summer 2020 WG Sebald Lecture argued that “foreignness is not a given” and, thus, “foreign is something we have to learn to do without [...] All languages are capable of expressing the culture of any people” [2]. Translating literature that involves or is based on myths is one of the most illuminative examples of how challenging the rendering of foreignness and foreign “mappings” can be.

The illustrative material of the article comprises works by two representatives of the classic and the modern Ukrainian literature – a prominent XIX-XX c. writer, translator and poetess Lesya Ukrainka (1871-1913) and a contemporary novelist-molfar Taras Prokhasko (b. in 1968). The works by these two authors offer an extraordinary reading experience in terms of not just exposing the readership to the specific plotlines and styles but to the whole Universe of the Ukrainian mythological thought.

“Lisova Pisnya” (1911) or *Forest Song* by Lesya Ukrainka is one of the most extraordinary examples of Ukrainian myths incorporated into a literary work. Ukrainian mythology is rich on cosmogonic myths [16: p.316] and, thus, mythologemes of world creation and creation per se are prevailing. Pantheism, that is the idea that “the universe conceived of as a whole is God and, conversely, that there is no God but the combined substance, forces, and laws that are manifested in the existing universe” [10], is at the core of Ukrainian mythological thinking and creates a setting for “Lisova Pisnya” and all of its characters. The “drama-fairy”, as Lesya Ukrainka calls her masterpiece, is based on the mythologemes of life and / after death, betrayal etc. as well as contains a range of mythological characters, which were also complemented by supernatural characters created by poetess. They shape a whole universe of supernatural creatures, living near humans, some of them representing the dead (for instance, the main female protagonist of the play – a mythological creature Mavka – is one of *mavkas*, which, according to Ukrainian mythology are souls of the dead girls [16: p.285]), others just the supernatural powers of nature. For example, *Lisovyk*. In Ukrainian mythological universe *Lisovyk* is the spirit of the forest as well as its master. According to V. Voytovych, people created a bunch of rituals and customs connected to pleasing the supernatural being so that it wouldn’t want to harm anyone since its main assistants are *fornication* and *fear*, although its greatest fear is *fire* [16: p.279]. Let us consider Lesya Ukrainka’s depiction of the character and its renderings in the English and German translations and retranslations:

a. Русалка (впливає на берег і кричить)
Дідуся! Лісовий! Біда! Рятуйте!

Лісовик (малий, бородатий дідок, меткий рухами, поважний обличчя; у брунатному вбранні барви кори, у волохатій шапці з куниці) [14: p.21]

a. a. RUSALKA (Comes swimming to the shore and cries out)

Grandfather! Forest Elf! There’s trouble, help!

FOREST ELF (A tiny bearded old man appears. He is nimble in his movements, but grave of countenance, dressed in dark brown, the color of bark, and wears a shaggy fur cap.) [13: p.180]

a. b. NIXE (schwimmt ans Ufer und schreit)

Zu Hilfe! Grossvater! Hilfe! Waldschrat! Hilfe!

WALDSCHRAT (ein kleiner bärtiger Alter, ehrwürdiges Gesicht, rasche Bewegungen, die Kleidung dunkel runderfarben, die Mütze aus Marder) [12: p.34]

a. c. ONDINE

Help! Old Lesh! Help!

LESH, a short, bearded old gnome, appears. His movements are nimble. He's dressed in browns the color of bark and wears a furry hat. [14: p.151]

a. d. Nymphe (taucht neben dem Ufer empor und schreit)

Großvater! Waldschat! Unheil! Hilfe!

Waldschat (ein kleiner, bärtiger, sehr flinker Greis, mit ernstem Gesicht; bekleidet mit einem Gewand in der Farbe brauner Rinde, mit einer buschigen Mütze aus Marderpelz) [15: p.43]

Firstly, *Lisovyk* as a character enters the scene through the "introduction" by another supernatural creature – *Rusalka* (a mermaid). In the Ukrainian mythology, *rysalky* (Pl.) are either goddesses of water, living on the bottom of the rivers and lakes or nameless little girls, who were born dead [16: p.449]. Thus, they can be perceived as the representatives of the dead souls. According to the Ukrainian myths they don't have souls but hearts, are very beautiful and like alluring and then killing young men, *mavky* (Pl.) are their girlfriends [16: p. 449]. In the first English translation (1950) of the drama by P. Candy (example a. a) we see that the translator opted for a calque *Rusalka*, which creates an allusion of a proper name and emphasizes the foreignness of the mythological character, whereas V. Tkacz and W. Phipps in the latest retranslation (2018) translated the character's name as *Ondine* – a well-known "mythological figure of European tradition, a water nymph who becomes human when she falls in love with a man but is doomed to die if he is unfaithful to her. Derived from the Greek figures known as Nereids, attendants of the sea god Poseidon [...] The word is from the Latin *unda*, meaning "wave" or "water." [11] Interestingly, the mythologeme of love between an ondine and a human that ends in a betrayal matches the narrative of "Lisova pisnya" with one major difference – Mavka is the one who falls in love with a young man called Lukash, whereas *Rusalka* is constantly flirting and making love to another supernatural character of the story (of Lesya Ukrainka's creation solely). Thus, rendering the character's name as *Ondine* can be confusing in terms of supportive role of *Rusalka*. Moreover, *rysalky* in the Ukrainian mythological universe are devoid of individuality (in myths and folklore always mentioned in Pl.), somewhat similar to water nymphs (the Nereids, the Naiads etc.) in the West European mythological tradition. Thus, rendering of the character's name as *Nymphe* in the German retranslation of 2006 (example a. d.) is not odd, though too generic, since it does not necessarily involve the element of water (for example, the Dryads – forest nymphs; the Oreads – mountain nymphs etc.). *Nixe* in the example a. b. (German translation of 1931) represents a well-known figure in Germanic mythology – "weiblicher Wassergeist (mit einem in einem Fischeschwanz endenden Unterkörper)" [4] – and comprises themes of female spirit and inhabitant of water and, thus, does not hamper the original image of the character. Hence, in the German and English retranlations *Rusalka* as a mythological creature was presented through domestication or adaptive transla-

tion, by introducing to the readers a mythological character they are well aware of (*Nymphe*, *Ondine*). In the first translations of the play into German and English, the intention of translators to present the character as close to the original mythological base as possible finds its realisation in adhering to calque etc.

However, it is not the case with another important mythological character of the play – the above-mentioned *Lisovyk*. In example a, *Rusalka* asks him for help, addressing him as *Дідусю*, which is a diminutive form of a *Grandfather* in Ukrainian, similar to *Grandpa*. Lesya Ukrainka depicts *Lisovyk* as a small, bearded grandpa with well-directed/ sharp moves and imposing countenance etc. In all four translations the endearment of the kind on behalf of *Rusalka* is absent (no diminutives in addressing *Lisovyk*) and thus the nature of the chemistry between the characters is lost, the theme of authority or kinship (*Grandfather/ Grossvater*) is the only one preserved. In both German translations (examples a. b. and a. d.) the character's name is *Waldschat* ("zottiger Waldgeist" [8] – a hairy forest spirit) from Germanic mythology. The first translation of 1931 (a. b.) remained more faithful to the original by rendering the character's description fully – "ein kleiner bärtiger Alter, ehrwürdiges Gesicht, rasche Bewegungen." Although *ehrwürdig* presupposes instilling respect from others, whereas in the original it is more about self-assertiveness of the character then about getting any validation from the outside. As for I. Katschaniuk-Spiech's translation of 2006 (a. d.), it deviates more from the original by shifting focus to the theme of authority and experience – "ein kleiner, bärtiger, sehr flinker Greis, mit ernstem Gesicht" (small, bearded, nimble elder with a serious countenance). The playfulness of the character, according to the Ukrainian mythological universe (*Lisovyk*'s inclination towards playing tricks on people, causing troubles etc.) is lost in both German translations. The first translation of the play into English (example a. a.) also modifies the character's image. Firstly, the name *Forest Elf* inevitably triggers a vision of a very small creature ("usually in tiny human form"), which deviates from the original's image. Moreover, its "grave countenance" totally changes the perception of the character. As we can see in the example a. c. the translator opted for creating a character *Lesh*, which doesn't evoke any association with the forest spirit, unless the reader is familiar with *Leshiy* in Russian mythology. The character is called a *gnom* (dwarf in Germanic mythology) with "nimble movements". Hence, the description is abridged and focuses solely on the size of the creature. Themes of "lord/ master of the forest" and "wise elder" are lost, which results in confusing perception of both plotlines development and mythological uniqueness of the background setting.

Thus, there is a clear tendency towards domestication of mythological characters in the retranlations of the play "Lisova pisnya" by Lesya Ukrainka, whereas earlier translations into both English and German demonstrate a distinct tendency towards preserving the mythological other. Though such adaptive translation indeed "helps the receiving culture accept and integrate something completely new by using terms that are already familiar" [1: p.182], it proves to be harmful to the translation of mytho-

logical elements, since it deprives myths of their cultural identity.

The novel "Neprosti" (2002) by Taras Prokhasko concerns people, not mythological creatures. It is structured as a listicle or a diary, where each chapter provides a list of events, coincidences, thoughts, trips, plants, plans etc. However, the macro-context of the story as well as its underlying concept is purely mythological – it is the chronicle of *Ненпрости* – “the earth gods” or the people with paranormal abilities. The so-called “not simple people” is the name Hutsuls in the Carpathians (Western Ukraine) gave to people, who knew more about the Earth and could apply that knowledge in mysterious ways. The introductory note to the novel informs the reader that it is an “alternative mythology of the Carpathians” and that the author is molfar himself. V.Voytovuch considers molfar to be a wizard or magician, even an evil spirit [16: p.321] According to the scholar, molfars used to gather herbs for potions, to prevent thunder-storm clouds, hail as well as make love potions, i.e. for forbidden love affairs etc. [16: p.321] However, it is worth noting that the general image of the molfars is usually associated with mysticism and goodness. In the eyes of the folk molfars were always respected and considered to know a lot more about everything on earth than ordinary people and, most importantly, they were assumed to have power to change whatever necessary or viewed as such. Thus, Taras Prokhasko is writing about something he not just believes in, which often is the case with myths, but has a profound knowledge about. Moreover, the themes of *feeling* and *knowing* are all over the text of this original novel:

b. Франциск *вважав* себе людиною поверхневою. Любив поверхню. Почувався на них впевнено. Не знав, чи є сенс залазити глибше, ніж бачить око. [5: p.20]

c. Деся у своїх гірких глибинах Себастьян *відчував* шалене скручування і розправлення підземних вод, замальовування і стирання світів, перетворення двадцяти попередніх років на насініну. [5: p.22]

d. Другою Анною *Ненпрости* зацікавилися власне тому, що вона так уміла *розуміти тварин*, що могла ставати такою, як вони, і жити з тим чи іншим звіром, не викликаючи в нього *неспокійного відчуття іншо-сті*. [5: p.31]

b. a. Franzysk *considered himself a superficial person. He loved surfaces. He felt confident on them.* He didn't know if there was any sense in digging any deeper than what is seen by the naked eye. [6: p.14]

c. a. Somewhere in the bitter depths within him Sebastian *felt the turbulence and calming of underground waters, he felt worlds being sketched out and erased*, the

transformation of the previous twenty years into a seedling [6: p.16].

d. a. The second Anna interested *the Unsimple* precisely because of her ability to understand animals, to become like them, and to live with this or that animal without arousing *an uneasy sense of otherness in it* [6: p.21].

Examples c. and c. a. illustrate the metaphor, based on cosmogonic mythologeme, being rendered in the English translation (2007, 2011) by Uilleam Blacker very accurately in terms of preserving the image of “worlds collapsing” (*відчував стирання світів – he felt worlds being sketched out and erased*). The irony in the example b. (the character's perception of himself as *shallow* is based on his love towards surfaces) is partially rendered in translation (example b. a.), however the pun is lost due to the differences between English and Ukrainian. The metaphor from example d is rendered accurately in translation (d. a.). The title of the novel in English is “*The UnSimple*” and it attracts attention due to its interpretation potential, which matches the ambiguity and indeterminacy of the original title (*Ненпрости*). Thus, “*The Unsimple*” constitutes an example of rendering the covert mythological elements in the contemporary Ukrainian novel without adhering to domestication or adaptation. Calque translation in this case proves to be the most appropriate in terms of the pragmatic aspect, since the original Ukrainian title leaves a source-language reader ambivalent about title's interpretation (if *Neprosti* denotes some “not simple” people (Pl.) or it is an allusion to the colloquial saying about hard times (*непрости часи настали*) etc.). Thus, in both the original and the English translation the mythological title, which becomes a key (and repetitive) concept of the novel, causes mixed readership expectations due to the preservation of its bizarreness via calque translation. Hence, calque in this case insures full rendering of *the mythological other* in English.

The considered examples of translations of works by two Ukrainian authors of the past and the present – Lesya Ukrainka and Taras Prokhasko – showcased the challenges and intricacies of translating mythological elements in the literary prose. The contrastive translation analyses showed that nowadays as opposed to the previous century, domestication is one of the most preferred strategies in dealing with mythological elements in literature. However, myth elements are of the critical intellectual value, since they enrich human knowledge with something new and, thus, their rendering by means of calque but not adaptive translation proves to be a sound translation decision, which assists in preserving mythological otherness – a worthy endeavour, indeed. Praemia virtutis honores.

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