

## **BISHOP DOSOFTEI AS A TRANSLATOR AND EARLY ROMANIAN RELIGIOUS POETRY**

**Doina Marta BEJAN**

Histories of the Romanian language and literature have often neglected translations favouring original texts, by considering the former to be mere imitations, or sources of artificial, unnatural structures. As a matter of fact, the European cultural languages have developed by imitating classical models, deliberately trying to reconstruct the Greek and Latin semantics, syntax and rhetoric by relying upon the vernacular linguistic material. Roughly speaking, the linguistic influences manifested in translation (lexical calques, the structural one, in particular) actually stimulated language creativity by building up derivation and compounding patterns.

The religious language, especially the biblical text, definitely influenced language evolution: new meanings, constructions, expressions originating from Hebrew, passed into Greek, Latin, Slavonic, then reached the educated Romanian, and later on the common language and familiar speech (Munteanu: 2008). The analysis of the phenomenon of translating sacred texts reveals the translator's attitudes and strategies starting from the religious principle of strict literality to the liberties hindered by usage and tradition. A bird's eye view of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> (former half) centuries Romanian religious writings easily shows that the Psalter, as a biblical reading book, was much more extensively translated and spread through manuscripts and printed papers than other canonical writings, such as ecclesiastical reading books (*The Tetraevangelion/ Tetraevangheliarul, The Acts of the Apostles/Apostolul and Pălia*), books of cult (*The Hieratikon/ Liturghierul, The Euchologion/Molitveľnicul and The Octoechos/Octoihul*), books of exegesis and moral enlightenment (*The Book of Sermons/Cazaniile, The Independent Homilies/Omiliile independente and The Lord's Prayer with Explanations/Tatăl Nostru cu tâlc*) or books of the ecclesiastic law (*Book of Rules and Regulations/Pravila*).

It is the impressive number of copies and variants that primarily distinguishes the Rhymed Psalter among our old literary writings. This does confirm the reputation held by the well-known doxological writing, both in the old times, when separate psalms or entire kathismata became parts of the religious service books, and during the centuries to come, when the linguistic form of the psalm was constantly considered a model in refining the Romanian artistic expression. The transposition of the Old Testament into Romanian, was performed much earlier than the printings which came out at Sibiu and Brasov or than most of the North-Moldavian manuscripts. This is proved by the latest information concerning the approximate time of producing the so-called Hurmuzaki's Psalter (Mares 2005: 308-315) which ranks the *Rhymed Psalter* to a privileged position among our first literary texts.

Despite the remarkable priority of its Romanian transposition, the *Rhymed Psalter* possesses, in all its known variants, irrespective of the time or place or their elaboration, a much more natural, intelligible linguistic expression, closer to the Latin word stock specific

to our language, than all the other canonical books. The *Rhymed Psalter* stands out in the old Romanian culture due to the formally remarkable unity of its oldest version. The clerks and typographers firstly operated the substitutions imposed by local linguistic norms, or replaced words and forms so as to make the content more intelligible, by evidently observing the requirements of the sacred texts [1]. In the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century Romania, a new attitude towards the form of religious books, in general, was more than obvious. Varlaam is the first who, in *Carte românească de învățătură* (*A Romanian Book for Learning*), published in Iași, works on texts or source-texts by summarizing or paraphrasing, while, concomitantly and still using the printed book, Simion Stefan also highlights the need of clarifying not only the expression, but also the meaning of the sacred text. In *The New Testament*, published at Bălgrad in 1648, and in the *Psalter*, printed in the same place three years later, the numerous marginal glosses help to clarify the meaning of some words. The Transylvanian scholar approached the model used by the Western critical editions of the period.

The 1673 publication of the well-known biblical book *The Psalter* „pre verșuri tocmită, în cinci ani foarte cu osârdie mare” by Bishop Dosoftei [2] represents an unprecedented achievement for the Romanian cultural space of those times, since Orthodoxy, traditionalist and conservative par excellence, did not encourage, on principle, any unusual artistic experiment, since translation had turned into an authentic poetical work, accessible by way of publication to a large audience, predominantly laymen in the street. The idea of versifying the psalms had its origins in the European Humanism and Reform movements: its predecessors are Calvin, the great poet Clement Marot and Theodore de Bèze in France, Jan Kochanowski in Poland, Schede-Lobwasser and Winenberg in Germany, Albert Molnar in Hungary. In the Orthodox culture, Dosoftei is the first and the most important versifier of biblical prose, after his forerunner Varlaam’s modest attempts. It is the first great book of Romanian poetry, about which, Nicolae Manolescu, in his *Critical History of the Romanian Literature*, stated that it was not Dosoftei’s translation of David’s Psalms that mattered, but his effort of creating a new poetical language ‘necessary for the great enterprise’.

From a theological perspective, Dosoftei’s versified translation is a deviation from literality (translated *ad litteram*, the psalms get an odd, unconvincing tone, characteristic of the Bible versions), whereas, from the literary and artistic perspectives, the language used does delight its reader. In his use of the Romanian language, Dosoftei recreated the text and provided versified solutions. In translating and versifying the biblical psalms, Dosoftei had to un/conscientiously choose between the Scripture cannon, honourably but strictly following the ecclesiastical tradition, or the living culture of his people, thus assuming the protection of the Orthodox norm modelled on the Romanian Christians’ understanding. “He has rendered *The Psalter* for everyone, (as humble as they might have been) who wished to approach God” and implicitly the moral ethics, as Nicolae Iorga appreciated.

“Și dreptului senină/ii va străluci lumină,  
Veselie și cunună  
Celor cu inima bună”  
(Psalm 96)

By translating and rhythmically versifying the *Psalter*, Dosoftei vernacularly adapted the actants’ natural environment, customs and daily activities:

“Tu dai fânului să crească,/  
Dobitoacelor să pască,/  
și crești pajistea cea moale,  
De scoate grâul din foale,  
De-ș culeg oamenii hrană  
Să le hie și pre iarnă.  
Că scot pita cu sudoare/ Să mănânce la răcoare,

*Din pământ agonisită  
Pre porunca ta cea svântă.  
și le-ai dat vinul să-și facă  
Veselie, să le placă”*

(Psalm 103)

as well as the image of the divinity:

*“Că Dumnezeu toate vede  
Din scaunu său ce șede  
în ceri, unde odihnește,  
De-acolo pre tot prăveste.  
Pe pizmașii și pârâșii  
Domnul va râde de însii  
Si-i va mostra de ocară  
Pentru care-îl supărară”*

(Psalm 2).

The long lasting confrontation between the Jews and the opposing nations during Prehistory and the Ancient Times, as depicted in the biblical psalms, turns into an occasion of metamorphosing the poetic expression and adapting a perennial theme to contemporary circumstances and conjecture – the conflicts between the Christian Moldavians and their enemies, the pagan Muslims, which the Bishop considered highly important for his people to whom he dedicated his poetical work:

*“Ca iată păgânii încordară arce  
Pun săgeți în tulbă, să grijăsc de lance  
și vin din tunerec cu arce pre-amână  
întru să săgete pe cei fără de vină  
Giurământul nu-ș țân, hotarăle strică, strică  
și de-mpăcăciune nu gândesc nemică”*

(Psalm 10).

The Rhymed Psalter defines Dosoftei, the poet, as a lyricist preoccupied by the human condition. Quite impersonal until a certain moment, the original psalms which are of a too general and often neutral expression, acquire in his transposition the flavour of an acute lyrical feeling:

*Pleacă-ți urechea către mine  
și să-mi fii, Doamne, spre bine  
și la ce zi te-oi striga-te  
Să-mi auzi de greutate,  
Că-mi trec zilele ca fumul,  
Oasele mi-s reci ca scrumul,  
Ca nește iarbă taiată  
Mi-este inima secată*

(Psalm 102).

He knew how to find the corresponding equivalences; he understood metaphors and translated them with successful equivalents, being able to enrich the psalmist's verses by personal ideas and images, the same as Arghezi exceptionally did, later on, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The lyrical pathos streams from the translation of one of the most powerful

humiliation psalms *Eli, Eli, lama sabachtani*, as Dosoftei strove to be original and modulate the Romanian language using new ways of expression, unpractised before:

*Si ca apa fui vărsat afară  
și oasele mi se rășchirară  
inema-n zgău mi se vesteziăște  
ca o ceară când se răstopeăște.  
Mi-i vîrtutea ca hîrbul de sacă,  
Limba-n gingini lipită mă-neacă.  
și m-ai lăsat, Doamne, -n țărâna morții...*

Much has been said about Dosoftei's almost exquisite art, the author excellently mastering the norms of prosody and artistic expression. The rhyme in couplets prevails, more often than not quite successfully, anticipating Eminescu: "*Cugetu-mi sfîntește, ochii luminează / Din sfînta lucoare, din senina rază*". There are also alternate rhymes:

*Cine-și face zid de pace  
Turnuri de frăție  
Duce viața fără greață  
'Ntr-a sa bogăție  
(Psalm 132)*

or, unexpectedly for the early years of the Romanian versification, enclosing rhymes may occur:

*Doamne, mă ferește  
cu sfîntul tău nume  
Dă-mi noroc în lume  
și-n veci mă păzește!*

The whole book reveals an acoustic impressionism, sometimes motivated by ingenious interior rhymes, as the Preface famous stanza:

*"și te voi cerca-te cu fața curată  
Să-ți văd sfînta față și prea luminată.  
Nu-ți ascunde, Doamne, fața prea cîstită  
Nu fugi de mine la vreme *cumplită*.*

Dosoftei's translation is a poetic creation of a high artistic level, where the prosody of folklore inspiration (folk poetry 5-6 syllable metrics, influenced Dosoftei's verses) mingles with elaborate imagistic constructions, as in the following fragment:

*La apa Vavilonului  
Jelind de țara Domnului,  
Acolo ședzum și plînsăm  
La voroavă ce ne strînsăm,  
Și cu inema amară,  
/Prin Sion și pentru țară,  
Aducîndu-ne aminte,  
/Plîngeam cu lacrimi herbinte.  
și bucline ferecate*

*lăsam prin sălci animate*  
(Psalm 47).

Dosoftei's Psalms (Psalm 96, in particular) left the pages of the book and entered the realm of orality (in slightly modified forms), turning into Christmas carols. Anton Pann gathered them in the 1830 collection *Versuri muzicești ce să cântă la Nașterea Mântuitorului nostru Iisus Hristos și alte sărbători ale omului* (Musical Verses to Sing for the Birth of Our Saviour, Jesus Christ and Other Festivities of Men). Subsequently, they could be found in all books comprising such productions in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Psalms, put into music and sung, for a period, at various church festivities, were introduced into schools near churches, and, thus, with children's contribution, the ancient religious hymns reached Christmas carols.

Together with Miron Costin, Dosoftei is ranked in the history of the Romanian literature among the greatest classical poets, the founder of the Romanian religious poetry. Speaking about Dosoftei in *The History of the Romanian Literature from its Origins to the Present*, George Călinescu remarks: "the language sweet flow, the sentence heavy liquid density, the word concreteness embalming abstract testimonies". The old Romanian culture becomes, due to personalities such as Dosoftei, "a marble block, where there sit, without being born yet, Eminescu and Creangă, Caragiale and Sadoveanu".

## Notes

[1] We consider that the majority of the modifications of the Romanian text of the Psalter are the result of the copyists and revisers' intentions and not of hazard. For information about the relationship between the original sacred texts and their old Romanian versions, see Gafton, 2005, pp 67 and others.

[2] Dosoftei, on his layman name Dimitrie Barilă, starts versifying the Psalter after 1665, simultaneously with its translation into Romanian from the Slavonic language, followed by Septuagint, a traditional version, specific to Orthodoxy. Found in Bishop Varlaam's entourage until 1653, under whose auspices he would have delineated his intellectual profile, Dosoftei, a good connoisseur of classical languages (Greek, Latin) and modern languages and cultures (Polish, Ukrainian, Russian, Neo-Greek), having already performed translation activities, was ready for an exceptional artistic and cultural experience. A bishop since 1658 (at the age of only 34 years!), a friend of Miron Costin and Dositei Notara (future Patriarch of Jerusalem), bishop of Moldavia from 1671, Dosoftei publishes in 1673, at Uniev, in Poland, the versified Psalter, *Psăltire a svântului proroc David* (The Psalter of Saint David, The Seer).

In the ten years of bishopric, Dosoftei's scholarly and typographic activity is overwhelming, being interrupted only by his diplomatic mission in January, 1684, when, being sent to Russia to accept the Tsar's sovereignty, Dosoftei is retained at Kiev. He temporarily returns to his country during the unsuccessful anti-Ottoman campaign of the Polish king, Sobieski, who forces him into a long and desolated exile at Stryj and Zolkiev. Anathematized by the Patriarch of Constantinople, excommunicated and degraded by the synod of Iași in 1688, harassed by the hostility of the Unitarian and Catholic clergy of Zolkiev, tormented by an endless yearning for his native country, Dosoftei dies on foreign land the 13<sup>th</sup> day of December, 1693, soon after his seventy-one anniversary.

## Sources

Anania, V. (1995) *Din spumele mării. Pagini despre religie și cultură*, Cluj-Napoca: pp. 208-209.

Andriescu, Al. (1997) *Studii de filologie și istorie literară*, Iași: Editura Universității „Al. I. Cuza”, pp. 1-89.

Arvinte, V., Alexandru Gafton (2007) *Palia de la Orăștie (1582). Studii*, Iași: Editura Universității „Al. I. Cuza”.

Buciumeanu, D. (2001) *Dosoftei poetul. O hermeneutică a „Psaltirii în versuri”*, Drobeta-Turnu Severin: D&Com SRL.

Candrea, I.-A. (1916), *Psaltirea Scheiană comparată cu celelalte psaltiri din sec. XVI și XVII traduse din slavonește*, edițiune critică de ~, I-II, București: Socec.

- Caraman, P. (2005) *Kochanowski – Dosoftei. Psaltirea în versuri. Influența lui Kochanowski asupra lui Dosoftei și considerații critico-axiologice*, Iași: Trinitas.
- Cartoian, N. (1940/1996) *Istoria literaturii române vechi*, II, București: Fundația Regală pentru literatură și artă, pp. 115-126.
- Cartoian, N. (1938/1974) *Cărțile populare în literatura românească*, București: Editura Enciclopedică română.
- Călinescu, G. (1941/1982) *Istoria literaturii române de la origini până în prezent*, pp. 53-55; ed. 2, București: Minerva.
- Chivu, Gh. (2000) *Limba română, de la primele texte până la sfârșitul secolului al XVIII-lea*, București: Univers Enciclopedic.
- Chivu, Gh. (2004) „Textul religios – model în cultura românească veche”, în *Studii și cercetări filologice*, Seria Limba și literatura română, nr. 3, pp. 11-18, Pitești: [www.letters.upit.ro](http://www.letters.upit.ro).
- Chivu, Gh. (2010) *Psaltirea – de la literă la spiritul textului sacru. Considerații asupra unui manuscris moldovenesc de la mijlocul secolului al XVII-lea*, în *Revista Limba Română*, Nr. 1-2, anul XX, 2010, Chișinău.
- \*\*\* (2004) *Dicționarul general al literaturii române*, II, coordonator general: Eugen Simion, București: Academia Română, pp. 725-730.
- \*\*\* (2000) *Dicționarul esențial al scriitorilor români*, coordonatori Mircea Zăciu, Marian Papahagi, Aurel Sasu, București: Albatros, pp. 264-266.
- \*\*\* (1979) *Dicționarul literaturii române de la origini până la 1900*, coordonatori Gabriela Drăgoi, Florin Faifer, Dan Mănuță, Alexandru Teodorescu, Leon Volovici, Remus Zăstroiu, București: Editura Academiei Române, pp.296-302.
- Dosoftei (1680/2007) *Psaltire de-nțăles*, Iași: Princeps.edit.
- Dosoftei (1673/1974) *Psaltirea în versuri*, București: Minerva.
- Gafton, Al. (2005) *După Luther*, Iași: Editura Universității „Al. I. Cuza”.
- Iorga, N. (1988) *Istoria literaturii românești. Introducere sintetică*, București: Minerva.
- Manolescu, N. (1990) *Istoria critică a literaturii române*, I, București: Paralela 45, pp. 13-18.
- Mazilu, D. H. (1997) *Introducere în opera lui Dosoftei*, București: Minerva.
- Munteanu, E. (2008) *Lexicologie biblică românească*, București: Humanitas.
- Ursu, N. A. (1987) *Concordanțe lingvistice între Psaltirea în versuri a lui Dosoftei și unele psaltiri românești din secolul al XVII-lea*, în „Limba română”, București, anul XXXVI, nr. 5, pp. 427-442
- Bagiu, L. V. *Dosoftei și traducerea psalmilor sau autohtonizarea expresiei poetice a sacralului*, <http://www.poezie.ro/index.php/article/1751722/index.html> .