Tips for translating Romanian poetry

Translating poetry is fun because you have to play the role of a reader and a writer at the same time. What makes a ‘good translation’ of a particular poem is always a matter of opinion – you will find many translations of famous poems, and undoubtedly every translator will claim that theirs is the best!

However, I think that most translators would agree that a successful translation involves close engagement with the original poem’s content and message, followed by a creative transformation of those verses into a new text that delivers their message effectively in English.

Here are five top tips to get you started:

1) Write a literal translation of the poem

It’s easy to feel intimidated by the blank page and beginning to write always feels rather daunting to me. Luckily, the thing that distinguishes translation from other kinds of writing is that you actually have a text there already to work with. Before I start translating, I read the poem carefully to understand what’s going on and at the same time I get a sense of the poetic voice and the tone of the poem. This might be easier for me, as Romanian is my mother tongue, than it might be for you, if you do not speak Romanian. I would suggest, therefore, that you start by writing a literal translation of the poem, using a Romanian-English dictionary to help you. You will probably end up with a text that sounds a bit odd and not much like a poem (don’t worry, that’s perfectly normal), but at least you will have a starting point.

2) Try to get a sense of the mood, tone and poetic voice

Read your literal translation carefully. Can you see a pattern of imagery emerging that might indicate the mood of the poem? Is the tone of the poem cynical, lyrical, angry or celebratory? What might be the feelings that the poetic speaker is trying to express? To boost your confidence in your own interpretation, you might want to research the poet and find out if they are particularly famed for their use of irony or romantic descriptions.
3) Turn your translation into a poem

As I’m sure you know from studying English literature at school, poems come in many different forms. You have probably come across sonnets, poems written in free verse, poems that rhyme and poems that don’t. You can choose any form or structure you like to create your translation – although it will contain much of the meaning and vocabulary choices of the original poem, it is now your own creation. Once you have established the message and tone of the original poem, you are in charge of communicating them to your reader in whatever way you feel works best. Consider rearranging the lines that sound grammatically awkward (unless you feel that awkwardness is part of the poem’s style). Create vivid images by weighing up different synonyms for the words you used in your literal translation (personally, I think verb choices are very important). Think about the rhythm of the poem - you can slow it down or speed it up through line length, sentence structure or phonological effects.

4) Redraft

After you have finished your translation of the poem, leave it for a day or so and return to it with a fresh perspective. Read it aloud. You will probably discover words or lines that you can revise. Ask someone else to read it and give you feedback on any sections that could be improved.

5) Relax

Although redrafting is very important, it’s tempting to keep returning to the poem and discovering ‘imperfections’ that you need to tweak. But there is no such thing as a perfect poem or a perfect translation so at some point you need to stop, relax and submit it to the prize! Whether you win an award or not, you should feel proud of the fact that you have wrestled with an unfamiliar language or reconnected with your mother tongue, engaged with a different culture or immersed yourself in your family’s heritage and, best of all, created a brand new, unique work of art.

By Gabi Reigh, Romanian Spotlight judge