

# Recreating “Holy Simplicity”: Romanian Renditions of Jacques Prévert’s Alicante

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Motto: “Venerationi mihi semper fuit non verbosa rusticitas, sed sancta simplicitas”  
St. Jerome<sup>1</sup>

## 1. Preliminary Remarks

Among all style virtues which are “notorious” to render even the most scathing criticism impotent – if anything in this world can – *sancta simplicitas* rules supreme. The incessant hooting of derision is, indeed, sporadically “disrupted” by a critical voice whispering in quasipious admiration: “The artist X writes, paints or composes with a beautiful *simplicity* of style”, which, coming from a redoubtable critic – as they all claim to be – is tantamount to a ‘full-blown’ eulogy.

Now, the question which most naturally springs to an art-lover’s mind is: what is it about simplicity that makes critics and artists alike bow before it in sheer admiration? To the lay mind, which tends to take simple, natural things for granted, simplicity, to be sure, is run-of-the-mill stuff. But to the connoisseur it is definitely more than meets the eye. The straight-forward reason accounting for this bipolar perception of the same style attribute lies in the very nature of their routine. Immersed in everyday simplicity, the lay mind craves for sophistication, whereas the connoisseur, almost choking to death with high-flown rhetoric on a regular basis, is

1 In *Letters*, 57, XII (*Patrologia Latina* XXII, 579), apud COD: 130.

simply dying for a gust of simple beauty. To the former, simplicity is the rule. To the latter, it is the exception thereto.

Yet the undeniable fact remains, that neither the lay mind nor the connoisseur can ever hope to imagine, and properly assess respectively, the huge amount of hard work that goes into creating “holy simplicity”. It is exactly a quarter of a century ago that I first set eyes – by sheer chance, or should I say luck – on one of Jacques Prévert’s “simples beautés” (“simple beauties”), *Alicante*.

For a native speaker of Romanian and English major minoring in German at the time, only remotely familiar with French but with no prior systematic study of it, my instant fascination with Prévert’s poem seemed, at best, a bit strange. Oddlier even, as time elapsed, its spellbinding grip on me continued as firm as ever. The only significant change which aging has effected in this respect is a mature reconciliation between my heart and my mind, with the result that I no longer dread to think what an in-depth analysis of the poem would do to its ‘first-blush’ magic. On the contrary, I now firmly believe that, far from diminishing its merits, any novel interpretation of, i.e. reading **into** the lines of a poem is apt to help enhance its potency and recreate its original beauty.

And that is precisely what I have taken upon myself to demonstrate in the forthcoming sections of the present contribution.

## 2. The Sublime Miracle of Creating “Holy Simplicity”

Acting as an added incentive to my determination to break the spell I had fallen under more than twenty years ago was Cassian’s apposite remark that there is a professed tendency with Prévert’s readers to succumb to the charms of his poetry from the very first lines they chance upon. The canonical “love at first sight”, Cassian claims, is being upgraded by the French poet’s readers to “love on first reading”<sup>2</sup> (cf. *Poeme*: 5). This particular remark just went to prove beyond the shadow of a doubt that, far from being an isolated case, what I at first considered an unnaturally strong reaction to Prévert’s poem is, in fact, taken to be the norm with the majority of his readership.

If, admittedly, a clear indication that I was just “one of the many”, Cassian’s claim, however, only added to my curiosity, for the question formulated in the previous section loomed now larger than ever: what is it about Prévert’s lyricism

2 The English translation of this excerpt, as well as of any of the following ones cited in languages other than English, originate with the author of the present contribution.

that induced such intense responses in his readers as early as their first poem? The best way to answer this question is by conducting a meticulous investigation of such a "first poem", which, in my case, is one of the miniature "simple beauties" in his first published book, *Paroles* (1946):

ALICANTE

Une orange sur la table  
Ta robe sur le tapis  
Et toi dans mon lit  
Doux présent du présent  
Fraîcheur de la nuit  
Chaleur de ma vie<sup>3</sup>.

(Verbatim translation:

"An orange on the table  
Your dress on the carpet  
And you in my bed  
Sweet present of the present  
Coolness of the night  
Warmth of my life".)

The very title of the poem, *Alicante*, sounds very much like an incantation. The poet is already at work weaving his magic as stealthily as a spider spins its cobweb. We even get a sneak preview of the poem's dual nature: down-to earth realism merging into surrealistic mirage, for *Alicante* can be taken to have both toponymic and metonymic reference. More precisely, the word is, in a primary meaning, a place name denoting a town in the south-east of Spain, and, in a secondary one, a wine made near the homonymous town<sup>4</sup>. With the aforesaid dichotomy in mind, the title can also be regarded as indicative of the melange of reason and lust permeating the poem.

At first blush line one claims to be the perfect depiction of still life. Then again – as previously specified – with Prévert there is always more than meets the eye.

3 In *Paroles*, 1997: 26.

4 A swift glance at Prévert's biography shows that in 1936 – i. e. a year after his divorce from Simone Dienne – he took a trip to Balearic Islands accompanied by his new lover, actress Jacqueline Laurent, whom he had only just met earlier that same year. Viewing this biographical detail as corroborative evidence, I made so bold as to infer that Prévert was no stranger to either of the two non-linguistic entities referred to: *obiter dictum*, Alicante is located within easy reach of the Balearic Islands.

And, since *table* in this particular context<sup>5</sup> can never aspire to assume esoteric significance, our only hope of encoded messages rests with the most conspicuous lexeme of the line: *orange*. Why, of all fruits, did Prévert decide to make this one the semantic focus of his poem's first line? The champions of realism would no doubt come up with a most convenient and reassuring answer like: because this was the very fruit he happened to be looking at when feeling inspired to write the poem. Since, however, I am not one of them, I beg to differ, and consider therefore the choice Prévert made as a highly significant one, in other words, a choice pregnant with hidden, thought-provoking meanings.

In keeping with the title, the poet could have chosen the grapes (Fr *raisin*) or the apple (Fr *pomme*), in anticipation of the Edenic love story alluded to in the concluding lines. Yet he preferred instead the orange. A quick search in a dictionary of symbols for the connotations of the fruit at issue has yielded most relevant information. Thus, on account of its many pips, the orange is symbolic of fertility. That explains why in Vietnam they used to give away oranges to newlyweds, whereas in ancient China an orange given as present to a young girl was tantamount to a marriage proposal (cf. *DS* III: 121).

A further possible reason motivating Prévert's choice is the semantic bivalence of the word: in a primary meaning it denotes "(evergreen tree with a) round, thick-skinned juicy fruit, green and changing to a colour between yellow and red", and in a secondary one: "(of the) usual colour of this fully-ripened fruit" (cf. *OALDCE*: 591; the semantics of the English equivalent of French *orange* also reflects the above-specified bivalence). Following the same line of argument, the colour, too, is most likely to be invested with symbolic connotations, which a second search in the dictionary of symbols revealed to be even more numerous than the ones attached to the former denotation of the word. Halfway between chthonian red and celestial golden yellow, this colour is considered to be the most actinic of all, in addition to being revered as the ideal balance between spirit and libido. However, if this balance is tilted one way or the other, then the colour immediately tends to assume connotations of either extreme, i. e. of divine worship or of debauchery (cf. *DS*: 121-2).

The balance of evidence amassed so far, on the other hand, seems to lie in favour of my dichotomous view of the poem, with *Alicante* striking a perfect balance between the libido-related first three lines and the spirit-related last three ones. The

5 Cf *table* (French) = (English) "table<sup>1</sup> [c] a piece of furniture with flat top supported by one or more upright legs [...]" (*LDEL*C: 1372).

chthonian red is at its best in the second and third lines, where *robe* [= dress], *tapis* [= carpet] and *lit* [= bed] are charting the mundane area, whereas *fraîcheur* [= coolness; chilliness], *nuit* [= night] and *chaleur* [= warmth] in the last two lines are more or less transparent allusions to the distant glow of the celestial spirit.

My "dual nature" hypothesis is further corroborated by the semantics of most of the nominal constituents employed. To be more specific, *robe* can also be taken to mean "skin of certain fruits, vegetables, or even animals" (cf. *DFR*: 702), thus taking the reader into a more intimate area, while *lit* adds to the intimacy via its secondary meaning "bed clothes" (id., 463). On the other hand, the rather abstract nonfigurative *fraîcheur* and *chaleur* in the "twilight zone" of the poem can be recategorized as conveyors of eroticism when used to signify "tenderness, freshness", and "heat; ardour; excitement" respectively (id., 349, 128).

The transparently libido-related first half of the poem is also, synoptically viewed, rising to a magnificent *crescendo* from

a) First line's still life ("Une orange sur la table"): no human agent in evidence, through

b) Second's line indirect delicate hint at human habitation ("Ta robe sur le tapis"): employment of possessive adjective *ta* as modifier of *robe* has both anaphoric and cataphoric effect, i. e. it refers the reader backward to a pre-still-life scenario, and forward to an as yet unpredictable denouement<sup>6</sup> to

c) Third line's most conspicuous presence of the beloved ("Et toi dans mon lit"): the juxtaposition of the personal pronoun *toi* – epitomizing unmitigated directness in face-to-face interactions, and of the adjunct *dans mon lit*, indicating spatiality at its most intimate – is the closest one ever gets to worldliness throughout *Alicante*.

Speaking volumes for its critical importance in the poem is the fact that this third line is the only *r*-free one, which could be taken to suggest perfect harmony. This, in turn, is second only to perfect equilibrium, the blessed state expressed in the fourth line, where poet and punster meet to produce an unparalleled synergistic effect<sup>7</sup>. The word play is here on two pairs of homophones: *doux* [=sweet; tender]

6 Last but not least, it also helps build up the suspense, for one cannot tell if the owner of the dress has left already – and we're about to hear the poet lamenting over "love's labour's lost" – or if she's still there, revealing her naked beauty to the one man who could bring it enduring fame.

7 *Obiter dictum*, Prévert had ample recourse to humorous employment of polysemy, homonymy, semantic transpositions and substitutions, etc, particularly in his satirical-poetry section of *Paroles* (cf. "La crosse en l'air" (111-142), "Le discours sur la paix" (226-227), "Noces et banquets" 9240-243), "La lessive" (107-111); in *Paroles*: 1997).

versus *du* [= of (expressing attributive postmodification: descriptive genitive), and *présent* [= present, gift] versus *présent* [= present time], a strategy applied both to reconcile the [+ tangible] feature of the first two words with the [+ abstract] feature of the last two ones in the line, and to effect a sugar-coated transition from the libido-related to the spirit-related half of the poem.

The word string *doux présent* can, on reflection, be viewed as a go-between in this smooth passage, for it is obviously a borderline-case in terms of semantic transparency. More precisely, chopping logic even further<sup>8</sup>, the pre-positive adjective *doux*, in this particular context, lends itself to two readings: an inherent one<sup>9</sup>, in line with the sensual “sweetness”-theme recurring throughout the first half of the poem (s. *Alicante* = sweet wine, *orange* = sweet fruit), and a non-inherent reading (*doux* = pleasing to the senses; gentle, kind or attractive in manner), heralding the spiritual beauty reflected in *fraîcheur* and *chaleur* later on. This magnificent interplay of direct and indirect reference generates in turn the epitomizing metaphor of the beloved, strategically placed at the exact point where the poet switches over from sensuality to the immaterial.

A bird’s-eye view of the poem is bound to reveal a similar symmetry along the vertical axis as well. And indeed the left-hand column, tracing the metamorphosis of the beloved from pagan deity into ethereal beauty, is composed of five nouns plus a noun substitute – the pronoun *toi* –, each of which can, to my mind, be taken to represent a certain gradation, namely:

- a) *Une orange*: The beloved woman – viewed as a symbol of fertility – is at the same time a mystery or a truth (cf thick skin vs juicy flesh of the fruit, an opposition that could as well be hinting at the suffering one has to undergo in order to finally be able to experience true love), which at this particular stage the poet tries to fathom or ferret out respectively, by indulging in the chthonian lust.
- b) *Ta robe* = Both meanings cited above (“dress” and “skin”) show the loved one divesting herself of false taboos and the conventions of prudery<sup>10</sup> (two major favourite targets of Prévert’s satirical poetry).
- c) *Toi (dans mon lit)* = The vision of the beloved woman lying naked on the bed is nothing less than a cautiously veiled reference to the consummated relationship.

8 I’m afraid the logic-chopping habit comes with the territory, in this particular case, with the territory of a linguist.

9 An inherent adjective is the label attached to an adjective which characterizes the referent of the modified noun directly.

10 Substantiating this interpretation is also the idiom *être sur le tapis* [= be the talk of the town].

The secret of reciprocated love is finally revealed to the poet and it is precisely this revelation that induces the shift from shallow sensuality to profound adoration.

d) *Doux présent*: As the poet discovers the as yet unrevealed virtues of the beloved – whom he no longer takes for granted – , spirituality is gradually coming into its own.

e) *Fraîcheur*: The two meanings of the word cited earlier on ("coolness" and "tenderness") suggest that, like any human being, the poet has divided loyalties: to the mind, to which inner beauty appeals as a rule, and to the body, which claimed precedence over the mind on account of its being the first to have "charted" the beloved.

f) *Chaleur*: Both "warmth" and "ardour; excitement" imply an emission of energy, an energy which has been slowly building up as we progress through the poem, carefully held in check up to the fourth line, only to be converted into radiant beauty at the very end.

A more thorough simultaneous investigation of the left-hand column along both vertical and horizontal axes reveals fascinating correspondences between the six gradations discussed above. For instance, first line's primeval metaphor represented by *orange* can without difficulty be matched to fourth line's finely chiselled *doux présent*, second line's metonymically employed *robe* to fifth line's *fraîcheur* (the skin of the beloved is fresh and tender), while *toi* in the third line invites a similar correspondence to *chaleur* in the sixth one (the glowing beauty of the naked beloved gives off an exciting warmth).

The same dichotomous principle divides the right-hand column into two zones: a space zone (*table – tapis – lit*) and a time zone (*présent – nuit – vie*). The symbolism attached to the three words in the space zone, however, is not in the least homogeneous: two of them (*table* and *lit*) are generally regarded as bare necessities, whereas the third one (*tapis*) is more of a luxury item. Worse even, just like *robe* in the same line, it is symbolic of social convention, in that it, too, prevents humans from feeling the natural simple beauty of earth. As opposed to the concrete spatiality, abstract temporality continues undisrupted down to the very last word. The chance effected in this zone is of incremental nature, more precisely the time span expands with each line (present < nuit < vie), tracing the evolution of the poet's feelings from burning passion to a lifelong love.

A comparison of the first and last lines of the poem seems to point in the same direction: the actinic-coloured *orange* (expressing intense, if short-lived feelings) has been sublimated to pure warm love (*chaleur*), destined to last for ever (s. *ma vie*). On the other hand, *ma vie* refers the reader crosswise to *une orange*, as a sym-

bol of fertility. Taking the reasoning one step further, we have every reason to claim that the poet's pursuit of love has come full circle: love burnt itself and was reborn again, phoenix-like, from its own ashes, only this time assuming a more mature, spiritual dimension. As indicated by the very title of the poem, the message which the poet wishes to put across, in all probability, is that not only does true love's potency increase with age (as that of wines does), but, paradoxically enough, it is autogenous, i. e. it has that rare power to regenerate itself.

This prevalingly metamorphic message I took the liberty to read into Prévert's lines is the more baffling, as the poem contains NO VERBS at all. In fact, both *Alicante* and *La Belle Saison* – the similarly patterned poem preceding it in the *Paroles*-series – look very much like any of Prévert's 60 collages (proudly exhibited in 1957 at Maeght Gallery in Paris, and then 6 years later on tour in several cities of France) or a surrealist painting, which is notorious to connect at first blush unrelated images and objects in a strange dreamlike way<sup>11</sup>. Nevertheless, despite all outward appearances, one cannot fail to sense the dramatic force which – as with Ravel's *Bolero* – keeps augmenting as we progress through the poem, a dramatic force which Prévert owes to his screenplay-writing skills<sup>12</sup>. And indeed, the first three lines of *Alicante* make up a perfect scenery on any theatre stage, which is coming to life under our very own eyes by using the alternate focus of an adroitly manoeuvred filming camera.

A champion of pataphysics<sup>13</sup> Prévert deploys all types of resources in his successful attempt to create dynamism in a verbless poem, for instance by playing off irregular against regular rhymes, or verses with different-numbered feet (even and odd: 7/6/5/6/5/5). The decreasing number of feet (7 > 6 > 5) throughout the first three lines has an effect similar to a zoom lens moving in from a distant to a close

11 In 1924 "Paris, 54 rue de Châteaux" – the address at which Prévert was living together with the painter Yves Tanguy and Marcel Duhamel, the founder of *Série noire* – became the meeting place of the French Surrealist Movement, of which the poet was an active member until 1930, when he co-authored a pamphlet openly criticizing the leader of the Group, André Breton, and subsequently left the Movement.

12 His career as a theatre and movie screenplay writer began in 1932, when Prévert wrote several scenarios for the comedy group "Octobre" (*La bataille de Fontenoy*, etc) and the dialogues for the movie *L'affaire est dans le sac*. Further writings in the line: *Crime de Monsieur Lange* (film dialogues: 1935), *Quai des Brumes* (screenplay: 1938), *Le jour se lève* (film dialogues: 1939), *Le visiteurs du soir* (screenplay: 1941), *Les Enfants du Paradis* (screenplay: 1944).

13 Pataphysics is the science of imaginary solutions, invented by the French dramatist Alfred Jarry (1873-1907), writer of symbolic farce, from which is descended the theatre of the absurd.



view, thus creating the illusion of motion, which Prévert astutely keeps alive by weaving into the pattern different rhyme types, such as: imperfect or oblique rhyme (*nuit/vie*), "rime riche", i.e. rich rhyme<sup>14</sup> (*présent/présent*), and leonine, or medial rhyme<sup>15</sup> (*doux présent/du présent*).

As a matter of fact, the rhyming pattern as such (XAAYAA) defies classification with any clear-cut category, striking one rather as either an idiosyncratic merger of intermittent and inserted rhymes<sup>16</sup>, or as a regularly rhymed poem disrupted by two thorn lines<sup>17</sup>. In the erotical equation inherent in the poem, X and Y are the variables, signalling the change from a sensual to a spiritual quality, while the remaining lines (AAAA) represent the constant, indicating that, though the poet's feeling has taken on a new dimension, its intensity continues undiminished. On the other hand, these four regularly rhymed lines can be viewed as lovingly embracing or enveloping<sup>18</sup> the fourth line (*Doux présent du présent*), which just goes to prove one more time that this is indeed the quintessential line of the poem. And so does, for that matter, the internal-rhyme pattern, while providing fresh evidence in support of the "inner harmony" theory advanced earlier on in this section.

Fluidity in the verb-free *Alicante* is also effected by setting in motion the energy immanent in one's senses. The poem synergetically appeals to four of them:

- a) the visual: *Alicante, orange, table, robe, tapis, toi, lit, présent*<sub>(1)</sub>;
- b) the gustatory: *Alicante, orange, table* (associated with food as a rule), *toi* (through metaphorical assumption of the sensuous features from *orange* in the first line), *doux*;
- c) the olfactory: *Alicante, orange, robe, toi* (s. metaphorical extension discussed above, which in this case is taken to apply to both *orange* and *robe*), *lit, présent*<sub>(1)</sub> (an account of metaphorical extension identical to that of *toi*), *fraîcheur, chaleur*; and
- d) the tactile: *Alicante, orange, table, robe, tapis, toi, lit, présent*<sub>(1)</sub>, *fraîcheur, chaleur*.

14 "A word rhymes with its homonym" (cf Alberto Rios' A Glossary of Rhymes: [www.public.asu.edu/~aarios/formsofverse/furtherreading/page2.html](http://www.public.asu.edu/~aarios/formsofverse/furtherreading/page2.html))

15 "Rhyme that occurs at the caesura and line end within a single line — like a rhymed couplet printed as a single line" (ib.)

16 *Intermittent rhyme* = "Rhyming every other line, as in the standard ballad quatrain. XAXA", *inserted rhyme* = "Rhyming abba"

17 "A line left without rhyme in a generally rhymed passage" (ib.).

18 S. also the other label employed for *inserted rhyme*: *envelope rhyme* (ib.)

The above analysis of “sense-appealing” lexemes has proved extremely useful in highlighting the keywords of the poem: *Alicante, toi* and *présent*<sup>(1)</sup>, the synesthetic focal points on which all four senses previously listed seem to converge. The effect of love – vicariously experienced through the poem by the reader/listener as well – on the poet is very much like that of getting intoxicated with the fine full-bodied Spanish wine: it will fuddle one’s brain at first and, as a result, turn one’s sensuality loose (s. first three lines coming to a climax in *Et toi dans mon lit*), and then, in a second, *in-vino-veritas*, phase, reach down into one’s subconscious and bring out one’s innermost feelings, yearnings and convictions, which one is most likely to repress when sobering up, namely that love is in reality a *doux présent* which one would be well advised to keep safe and tend as one’s most cherished possession. The poet’s final feeling is one of *joie du vivre*, of consummate happiness: he seems to have found his soul mate at last<sup>19</sup>.

Which brings us to a possible explanation accounting for Prévert’s paradoxical decision to banish all verbs from his poem. If the equally verbless *La Belle Saison* was intended, in all probability, to spotlight a certain moment of everyday routine, *Alicante* most likely tries to capture this unique moment of sheer bliss and render it eternal. Furthermore, if the continual flow of love’s highly protean energy is also suggested by the absence of punctuation marks all through the poem up to the very end, then the final full stop resorted to can only be taken to indicate that the poem must be viewed as a self-contained unit, which in turn reflects a completed evolution of the feeling depicted, hence the Faustian “Verweile doch! Du bist so schön!” – stance of the poet<sup>20</sup>. In *Alicante*’s eulogising, concluding lines, Prévert, the surrealist, turns inevitably romantic, to such an extent that the reader all but hears John Keats’ quintessential “A thing of beauty is a joy for ever:/ Its loveliness increases, it will never pass into nothingness” (“Endymion” , bk.i, 1.1, in *Selected Poems*, 1996, Berkshire: Penguin, p 53).

19 An idle hope, alas, for in 1943 he was to fall in love with Janine Tricotet, his wife-to-be (1947) and mother of his daughter, Michele (1946).

20 “Linger a while! Thou art so fair!”: the famous words enunciated by Faust when addressing the fleeting moment (cf Goethe, *Faust*, Part I, Scene IV, lines 1700-01, cf *Goethes Werke*, herausgegeben von dr. Chr. Christiansen, Gutenberg Verlag, Wien, p 298).

### 3. The Sustained Toil of Recreating "Holy Simplicity"

A *prima facie* by far less strenuous task than ferreting out its cryptic meanings, translating *Alicante* into Romanian is not exactly mere child's play. Though, admittedly, of common lineage – i. e. they are both descended from Latin – French and Romanian differ in terms of the *forma mentis* of their native speakers, which more often than not came to be viewed as the crux of the matter in literary translation. Hence the challenging decision facing the translator, who is expected to choose between two types of approach: the ethnocentric one, which advocates "domestication" of the source-text (cf. Schleiermacher, in Störig 1969: 47) – i. e., in lay English, "bringing it all back home" – , or the ethnodeviant approach, promoting "alienation" of the target-text (ib.) – i. e., in non-linguistic parlance, "sending the reader abroad".

#### 3.1 Gellu Naum's Rendition of *Alicante*

A surrealist poet himself, Naum<sup>21</sup> devoted his writings to clearing away fusty literary conventions rather than moral ones, in a bold attempt to bring in philosophy and mathematics to rationalize chaos and randomness. His poetry sets out to shock readers into accepting the new conventions either by juxtaposing extremes linguistically (via employment of antonyms) and philosophically (geometric patterns vs. amorphous figures, zoomorphic vs. human representations), or by doing away with capitals and punctuation marks.

In view of the above representation, Naum's translation of Prévert's *Alicante* (s. verbatim translation into English below) strikes one as a disconcertingly orthodox one:

O portocală pe masă  
Rochia ta pe covor  
Și tu în patul meu  
Cadou gingaș al clipei

21 He had a B. A. in Philosophy (with studies begun in Bucharest and pursued later in Paris) and a penchant for flamboyant nonconformism. He wrote poetry *Camera cu ceață* ("The Foggy Room"), *Heraclit*, *Oglinda oarbă* ("The Blind Mirror"), *Vasco de Gama*, *Libertatea de a dormi pe o tâmplă* ("The Freedom to Sleep on a Temple"), etc, plays and poems for children (*Cartea cu Apolodor* ("The Book Featuring Apolodor"), *A doua carte cu Apolodor* ("The Second Book Featuring Apolodor": National Writers Association's Award) and was constantly acclaimed as one of the best translators of French literature (Diderot, Stendhal, Hugo, Prévert, Char).

Nocturna mea răcoare

Căldura vieții mele.

Poeme: 14

(An orange on the table

Your dress on the carpet

And you in my bed

Delicate present of the moment

My nightly coolness

My life's warmth.)

The only tenable “mitigating circumstance” that could be invoked in justification of his ethnodeviant, or better said, “target-language-genius-deviant”<sup>22</sup> version is an otherwise perfectly legitimate reaction of the disciple standing in awe of his surrealist master.

The first point I beg to differ on is Naum's decision to keep on the fruit, of which the French signifier (*orange*), pregnant with far-reaching connotations, is a far cry from the euphony-disrupting bulky Romanian *portocală*<sup>23</sup>.

The next most striking discrepancy is the complete disregard of the central pun (*Doux présent du présent*), causing – as expected at this particular juncture – a sharp decline in artistic craftsmanship. This the Romanian translator does his best to cushion by bringing *gingaș* [= delicate; gentle; loving, affectionate, tender (cf *DRE*:473)]<sup>24</sup> into play, an epithet which makes unambiguous reference to the inherent beauty of the beloved.

As for the conveyance of the romantic streak revealed in the concluding lines, Naum thinks fit to resort to prepositive employment of the adjective *nocturna*<sup>25</sup> relating to *noapte* [= night]. The effect is being further intensified through skilful as-

22 “Genius” here is taken to denote the “creative power” inherent in a certain language.

23 Discussion of this – to my mind – rather infelicitous choice will be resumed later on in subsection III.2.

24 cf DFR, p.252: “**DOUX, DOUCE** [...]3. *Gingaș*: *voix douce*”.

25 Even though there is no other adjective available relating to the noun *noapte*, most native speakers of Romanian still tend to regard it as a neologism and use instead the prepositional periphrasis *de noapte* in attributive function. In this respect Romanian differs from English, where two adjectives relating to night share and share alike: *nocturnal* has come to cover the formal and the technical styles (cf *a nocturnal visit*, *nocturnal creatures such as owls and badgers*, s. *LDEL*: 922), while *nightly* has taken on the informal meanings (cf *a nightly news broadcast*, s. *LDEL*: 919). It is precisely this semantic ramification that practically left me no other choice but to translate *nocturna* as *nightly*.

sociation of this adjective indicative of the elevated style with *răcoare* ("coolness"), a word pertaining to the average Romanian vocabulary. Furthermore, both prepositive employment of adjectives and recourse to such synphastically ill-assorted lexemes, to be sure, are salient features of the Romanian Romanticism.

As would be expected from a literary-convention defying poet, the rhyming pattern of the original seems to be the least of Naum's concerns. It is, consequently, conspicuous by its absence. The decreasing number of feet throughout the first three lines, on the other hand, is being strictly observed (8 > 7 > 6) – if shortened by a foot each – , and, as a concomitant thereof, so is the ploy of alternating lines with even and odd number of feet. The concluding lines however, with a sequencing of identical numbers (7-7-7), no longer reflect the original pattern. Moreover, as if intent on demonstrating that, in his view at least, these lines are on a par in terms of final significance attached to the poem, the Romanian translator takes the liberty of inserting an external word *mea* [= my] in the fifth line, in order for the number of feet to continue undiminished.

All in all, I consider Naum's rendition of *Alicante* to be a fairly faithful one, with respect both to meaning conveyed and to lack of canonical formal restraints. Its, so to say, capital sin, nevertheless, is the failure to put across to the Romanian reader the vast array of connotations discussed further above in the previous section, inevitably compounded by that of the same unsuspecting reader to grasp the complexity hiding behind the "holy simplicity" of these six lines.

### 3.2. My Own Rendition of *Alicante*: A Modest Proposal

A fair inference from the last statement above would be that it takes more than a true-to-pattern or even true-to-spirit translation in order for the reader to realize that – as previously specified – there is actually to *Alicante* much more than meets the eye. My personal choice in this particular case – which, needless to say, does not necessarily have to be also the ideal one – is the only rendition apt to put a translator on her/his mettle, namely the one true to the genius of the target language. With not even the slightest intention of passing it off as such a one, I am now putting forward my own translation of Prévert's poem, accompanied by a verbatim English version:

Un mango pe noptiera  
 Rochia ta pe covor  
 Și tu în dormitor  
 Deliciu-n dar, dar temporar

Al noptii crud fior

Al vieții mele dor.

(A mango on the bedside table

Your dress on the carpet

And you in my bedroom

Delight granted, if temporar(il)y

Night's tender thrill

My life's ardent desire.)

Now then, since a first glimpse of my rendition will most certainly induce many a reader to rashly assign me to the “traduttore-traditore” (translator-traitor) type, an ample gloss is additionally submitted below in defence of the choices and changes that have been made and effected respectively.

For openers, I substituted *mango* [= mango] for *portocală* [= orange], a decision justified by:

a) The oversized four-syllable *portocală* (Neo-Greek origin: *portokáli*, cf *DEX*: 827) is, so to say, euphonically-challenged when compared to sprightly two-syllable *orange* (Arabic origin: *nāranj*, cf *CED*: 1009).

b) In addition to ruining the musicality of this first line, the larger number of syllables in *portocală* inevitably shifts both the caesura further towards the end and, with it, attention away from the symbolic connotations of the fruit, cf:

“Une orange // sur la table” (Prévert)

3 syllables      4 syllables

Un mango // pe noptieră (Măciucă)

3 syllables      5 syllables

“O portocală // pe masă” (Naum)

5 syllables      3 syllables

A phonetically more felicitous choice – compared to Naum’s *portocală* – would also have been the three-syllable *piersică* [= peach], which, due to its round form and delicate skin, in particular, has the added advantage of connoting maidenly beauty at its ripest. Nevertheless, redundant as it sounds rhythm wise, the extra syllable is by far not the main disadvantage of the word *piersică*. What really grates on the ear of a sensitive reader here is the sibilant *s* it contains, most likely to mar the euphony of the poem. Finally, a third factor which precluded the use of *piersică* was the fact that, unlike exotic oranges, peaches are indigenous to Romania, a detail which in turn can, on reflection, cause the aura of mystery surrounding the beloved to grow dimmer.

With *mango* the poem runs no such risk (cf *mango*: "a tropical pear-shaped" (*OALDCE*: 517) "fleshy yellowish-red fruit" (*DOE*: 496)). On the contrary, by bringing an implied rhyming pattern (*mango/tango*) to bear on the subconscious, it helps build up the erotic suspense (cf also the famous saying "it takes two to tango").

A further translational licence I resorted to is the substitution of *noptieră* [= bedside table] for *masă* [= table], in an attempt to:

a) Compensate rhythmically for the missing foot, cf:

"Un orange sur la table" (7 feet)

Un mango pe masă (6 feet)

b) Match – even if imperfectly (cf: **Un mango pe noptieră**) – the euphonic effect which Prévert achieves through multiple employment of *r*, cf:

"Une orange sur la table/ Ta robe sur le tapis" (all through the poem, as a matter of fact, except for line 4)

c) Compensate semantically for the missing *pat* [= *pat*: *noptieră* = **bedside table**], while giving a preview of what is about to happen in the bedroom (*dormitor*). Furthermore, taking the reverse route, the reader can by inference – as well as by comparing lexical structures – read into line 4 (*Și tu în dormitor* = And you in the bedroom) the sequel *Și tu în patul meu* [= And you in my bed]), semantically equivalent to Prévert's *Et toi dans mon lit*, and perfectly consistent with *Un mango pe noptieră* [= A mango on the bedside table].

The third blatant change effected is – as anticipated above – the substitution of *dormitory* [= bedroom] for *pat* [= bed]. This was done mainly in compliance with the rhyming pattern, while observance of the rhythmical one (decreasing number of feet throughout the first three lines) left me no other way out but to drop the possessive *meu* [= my].

The semantic role attached to *dormitor* is identical with that included in the semantic description of *pat*, namely Locus. The only difference between them resides in the feature [size], with *dormitor* semantically incorporating *pat*, which, of necessity, brings about a major change in the dynamics of these three lines. Thus, even though faithfully picking up the *Bolero*-like *ostinato* of *Alicante*, my rendition unfortunately fails to reflect the zooming-in technique applied by Prévert. The decrease in minuteness, however, is compensated for by an increase in subtlety, in that *dormitor*, through lack of precise targeting, allows of an even more veiled reference to sensuality "on the loose", with the ulterior motive in mind of making addi-

tional amends for the double occurrence of *r*, which renders the harmony of the third line slightly imperfect.

Now then, the acid test for any translator brave enough to take on Prévert's *Ali-cante* is undoubtedly line 4. That is precisely why, acutely aware of the sacrifices I had already made for fear of not altogether marring the holy simplicity of the poem, I decided to keep the pun on at all costs. After numerous unsuccessful attempts which all seemed to confirm my worst fear, namely that I was merely squaring the circle, a sudden flash of inspiration produced *Deliciu-n dar, dar temporar*, i.e. the closest I could ever hope to get to Prévert's *Doux présent du présent*, even if, inevitably, at the expense of some other technical detail: in this particular case, the number of feet (exceeding by two – not one by one – that of the previous line).

The pun in my translation is on the semantic equivalent of French *présent*<sub>(1)</sub>, *dar*<sub>(1)</sub> [= *n.* present, gift], and its homophone *dar*<sub>(2)</sub> [= *conj.* but]. However, in order for it to take effect, insertion of an additional comma between the two homopones presented itself as a must, with the morphological versescape adjusted accordingly. Thus, the Romanian counterpart of French *présent*<sub>(2)</sub> – ostensibly alluding to a short-lived feeling – is here the lexeme *temporar* [= *adj.* fleeting, temporary; *adv.* temporarily], which has the added advantage of recreating, together with *dar*<sub>(1)</sub>, the leonine rhyming pattern of the original, cf *Doux présent / du présent* and *Deliciu-n dar, / Dar temporar*.

The reverse strategy has been applied in the case of the French adjective *doux*, rendered semantically by the Romanian noun *deliciu*, which appeals to the palate and to the eye alike, cf *DEX*, p 274: “Plăcere deosebit de mare; desfătare. *Fig.* (Fam.) Lucru, ființă încântătoare” (“Immense pleasure; delight. *Fig.* (Inf) delightful thing or creature”). A more appropriate choice would have been the adjective *delicious* [= delicious], with an unambiguously gustatory reference of its primary meaning. However, for obvious rhyming reasons specified above, the only possible employment of this adjective is a prepositive one, which most native speakers of Romanian would consider highly emphatic, or, worse even, construe as connoting frivolity – as indicated by the addition inserted below, cf *Delicios dar, ... bună bucatăică!* (*Delicious present, ... quite a dish, isn't she?*).

Providing a sharp contrast to the above interpretation, *Deliciu-n dar* is a more felicitous match for the French *Doux présent*, perhaps due to the very fact that it is equally uncommon in everyday speech. The “fully-fledged” phrase reads *în dar*, but occurrence of a redundant foot in the first half of the line greatly discouraged me from using it as such and made me prefer instead the abridged form of the preposition, i.e. with *î* dropped. A regular of literary style, *-n dar* is at heart a verbless



abbreviated relative clause (cf *Deliciu (care mi-a fost dat) în dar* = Delight (which has been) granted), with *-n dar* [= as a present] performing as a syntactic synonym of the passive past participle *dăruit* [= bestowed, given away]. My prime reason for translating *Alicante* – the reader is kindly reminded – was to reveal the high complexity of the logic inherent in the simple beauty of the poem, and that is exactly one direction in which both the elliptical relative clause *Deliciu-n dar* and the pun effected (*dar*<sub>(1)</sub>, *dar*<sub>(2)</sub>) adduce copious proof.

The romantic streak in lines 5 and 6 is being made conspicuous through recourse to reversed word order: premodifying nominal phrase + modified noun, cf *Al noptii...fior*, *Al vieții...dor*, in place of the run-of-the-mill sequencing of postmodified nouns *fior... al nopții*, *dor al vieții*.

Again, for rhyming reasons, *răcoare* had to be ruled out as a potential match for French *fraîcheur* and I turned instead to the double-barrelled *fior*, which can be stretched semantically to connote either excitement and joy (cf English *thrill*), or an unpleasant sensation of coldness, especially from fear or discouragement (cf English *chill*). Extremely beneficial though it was to rendering the line's key-concept, this last manoeuvre left the verse, however, with a missing foot and an incomplete range of meanings, for the "tenderness" connoted by *fraîcheur* was still nowhere in evidence. The most suitable candidate for filling both these functions turned out to be the adjective *crud*, which, in conjunction with *fior*, also contributes to quasireduplicating the phonetic versescape (Observe, in this respect, the double occurrence and the position of *r* in the French word, as compared with the Romanian word string: *fraîcheur – crud fior*). An equally appealing feature of this adjective is its availability for assuming a negative connotation suggested by its secondary meaning ("cruel"), which makes it an ideal match for the semantically bivalent noun it premodifies.

Finally, for both consistency's sake and reasons listed above, the sixth line is replacing *căldură* (the semantic equivalent of French *chaleur*) with the less abstract, yet highly protean *dor*, possessed of five topic-related meanings defined as follows: "1. Strong desire to see (again) sb or sth which one is extremely fond of [...] 2. A state of feeling in which one is striving for, hankering after or aspiring to sth [...] 3. Suffering caused by the love for s.o. who is far away [...] 5. Taste, fancy, liking for (sth to eat or drink) [...] 6. Strong erotic feeling for s.o."(cf *DEX*: 316)

This vast array of meanings is one of the two major reasons for which *dor* can be regarded as the focal point in my rendition. The other one is closely related to that paradoxical omniscience of a translator who was not contemporary with the author of the original. In other words, even if denied the privilege which his contemporary

readers were allowed, of relating Prévert's poetry to firsthand information on its author, I am at this particular juncture in a position to ground my rendition on carefully sifted biographical facts. It is precisely here that the discrepancy between poet and translator chronology wise looms larger than ever: the former's view of what she/he is creating is prevailingly prospective, whereas the latter's view of what she/he is recreating is a decidedly retrospective one. That in turn accounts for Prévert's unadulterated bliss while contemplating what he naively imagines to be the love of his life (cf *Chaleur de ma vie*), as contrasted to my *Al vieții mele dor*, a more tentative claim to everlasting happiness – much rather an undisputed one to “love's labour's lost” – , which only a furtive glance at years 1943, 1946 and 1947 of his biography (s. Note 19 above) could have generated.

The very origin of the lexeme *dor* (cf *DEX*, p. 316: Lat. pop. *Dolus* (< *dolere* “a durea”); cf Vulgar Latin *dolus* (< *dolere* “to hurt, to pain”), in association with the negative meaning of *crud* (= cruel), is indicative of a new dimension which my translation assumes: that of the suffering caused by love, or better yet, by the less cheerful prospect of fading or no longer reciprocated love. This rather disquieting note I took the liberty to end on would, admittedly, be more in tune with a poem entitled, say, *Lachryma Christi* (cf *CED*, 797: “(L, Christ's tear) a sweet but piquant wine from grapes grown on Vesuvius), but, if we are to grant the logic of lines 4 and 5 in Prévert's original, as well as the semantic interplay of the concluding lines (cf *fraîcheur - chaleur*), then the notion of “everlasting love” tends to get a bit fuzzy.

So, in the last analysis, what my version actually effects is a subtle shift in perspective, from the auctorial present – i.e. past, as viewed by a contemporary reader<sup>26</sup> – to a “fast-forwarded” future-in-the-past – as viewed by same. Or, metaphorically put, it suggests that, intoxicated with this noble feeling as he seemed to be, the poet's quest for the love of his life was in reality not over at the time.

With the burden of this slightly altered perspective lying heavy on my mind, I did my best to keep the rhyming and the rhythmic patterns unchanged. Unfortunately, adherence to the former could only take effect at the expense of the latter. Even so, with the lines each longer by a foot than the respective lines of the original, the alternation of odd and even numbers of feet is nevertheless being observed – though not in the order of the original, cf Prévert: odd/even/odd/even/odd/odd, Măciucă: even/odd/even/even/even/even – and so is the difference in number of feet between consecutive lines, with the sole exception of line 4, which, given the symmetry imposed by the leonine rhyming pattern, could only accommodate an

26 By “contemporary” here I mean a reader contemporary with the translator of the poem.

even number of feet. Submitted below are the three rhythmic patterns compared: Prévert: 7/6/5/6/5/5; Naum: 8/7/6/7/7/7, Măciucă: 8/7/6/8/6/6. Since the second half of the poem is the one which, as they put it in broadcasting parlance, fades in the closing music, I thought fit – unlike Naum – to follow the tapering pattern of the original.

Which brings us to yet another forte of Prévert's *Alicante*: its musicality.

#### 4. The Magic Power of Setting "Holy Simplicity" to Music

As most of his poetry<sup>27</sup>, this poem, too, all but cries out loud for being set to music. Apparently this loud cry got Chuck Perrin's sharp ear, who, by writing the music for it, immensely enhanced its lyricism.

*Mutatis mutandis*, when setting a poem to music, the composer is in fact recreating it in a *sui generis* fashion. In our case, a fashion which only a listener familiar with Prévert's style can hope to empathise with. Nonetheless, on first hearing Perrin's *Alicante*, I must confess I was rather at a loss for words and I had to play it several times before finally uncovering the major strategies employed for transposing the poetical into the musical, and subsequently coming to terms with his rendition. For instance, the interplay of regular and irregular rhymes Perrin reflects by following one beat or series of beats while altogether ignoring the next one. Furthermore, certain melodic patterns which at first blush sound a bit out of tune with the larger arrangement of music are there to remind the listener that, besides turning words into rhythmical elements, this magic art has the by far more important mission of bringing out novel meanings, in particular connotations which not even the boldest literary critic could ever dream of reading into the lines of a poem. Still, with all its complex deep structure patterning, Perrin's rendition, too, is superficially possessed of a Prévert-like simple beauty.

More importantly even, the conversion of one form of art into another is accompanied by a secondary one, of energy types. As previously shown, the last three lines of the poem sublimate sexuality into spirituality. Ultimately, with Perrin's translating it into music, *Alicante* divinely transcends this province and rises above

<sup>27</sup> Joseph Kosma – a Hungarian musician whose acquaintance Prévert made as early as 1934 – was the poet's main collaborator in the province of music (cf. *Chasse à l'enfant* and *L'enfance* (1936), *21 chansons* (1946)). Further celebrities in the field who showed an interest in Prévert's poems: Yves Montand, Juliette Gréco, Jacques and Marianne Oswald, Serge Reggiani.

the spiritual. To sum up. I am in no position to speak for Naum or Perrin, but I can certainly speak for myself, and confess that, all in all, uncovering the complexity behind it, and recreating the miraculous „holy simplicity” of Prévert’s *Alicante* was an extremely time-consuming job, but a week away from hard labour. Though, to be perfectly candid about it, I have got a further confession to make: “toiling away” at an exquisite love poem by a “notorious” lover of simple beauty whose only fault was that he believed in the magic power of eternal love is, indeed, hard labour, but, to be sure, a hard LABOUR ... OF LOVE.

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### Recreating "Holy Simplicity": Romanian Renditions of Jacques Prévert's *Alicante*

While still under the spell of Jacques Prévert's intriguingly unsophisticated *Alicante*, and in relentless pursuit of uncovering novel strategies for creating literary beauty, I decided to subject the poem to a minute scrutiny in the hope of ferreting out the secret stuff "holy simplicity" is made of. Much to my surprise, "lurking" behind this *sancta simplicitas* I found a fine network of complex patterns, each carefully designed to interact with the remainder in a flawless manner, thus considerably enhancing the potency of the ensemble. The following are several of the major patterns involved: dichotomous partition into sexuality and spirituality; colour-related symbolism; word play; dual-nature semantic pattern of keywords (signalling interweaving of libido-related and spirit-related zones); interplay of inherent and non-inherent readings of adjectives, of regular and irregular rhymes, or of verses with different-numbered feet (even and odd); effective intermingling of lexemes which synergetically appeal to four human senses.

In the second phase, my research was steered away from fathoming the miracle of creating "holy simplicity" towards investigating the sustained toil of recreating it in a different language: Romanian. The two subsections devoted to the topic in question submit to the reader Gellu Naum's translation of *Alicante*, and the one originating with none other than the author of this contribution respectively. A brief comparison of the two renditions has yielded the following points of dissimilarity: a) Naum's is a true-to-spirit translation, whereas mine has been created with the genius of the target language in mind. Herefrom stem the main contrasts listed below. b) Naum keeps on the fruit (Fr signifier *orange*, Rom signifier *portocală*), while I made so bold as to replace it by the equally exotic mango for reasons specified under III.2 below (s. also substitution of *noptieră* (= bedside table) and *dormitory* (= bedroom) for *masă* (Fr *table*) and *pat* (Fr *lit*) respectively. c) Naum completely disregards the pun in line 4, whereas I did not think twice about slightly modifying the rhythmic pattern in order to be able to render the former into Romanian. d) Likewise, Naum translates in utter defiance of the rhyming pattern, whereas to me observing it is a matter of prime importance.

Needless to say, I am quite willing to take both the blame and the credit – if any – for the vast array of meanings I took the liberty to read into Prévert's poem, as well as for the translational licences resorted to in the hope of successfully putting these unique connotations across to the reader.

The concluding section discusses still a further possibility of recreating Prévert's *Alicante*, namely by setting it to music. In this respect, Chuck Perrin's rendition has the added advantage of enhancing its lyricism, while concurrently taking the poem to that magical space hovering above the spiritual.

**Keywords:** *style simplicity; French modern poetry; sexuality vs. spirituality; translation; Romanian; true-to-genius-of-target-language rendition; setting poetry to music.*