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## TWO LATIN TRANSLATIONS OF A PASSAGE OF PLATO'S "LETTERS"\*

**Summary:** In his Latin translation of Plato's *Letter VII* 326b-c Leonardo Bruni used the already existing translation of the passage made by Cicero. The paper shows how the Florentine humanist treated the version of his master: he reproduced it with slight modifications caused by his desire for originality.

**Key words:** Plato's *Letters*, translation, Cicero, Leonardo Bruni.

In this article I confront and compare two translations of a passage of Plato's *Letter VII* (Pl. *Ep. VII*, 326B-C). The author of the first one is Cicero and his translation of the Greek text is used for considerations about the need of moderation in eating and drinking in the book V of *Tusculanae Disputationes*. The second one is a work of Leonardo Bruni and it is a part of the complete Latin translation of Plato's *Letters*, made by the humanist from Arezzo in the 1426, considered by the scholars studying the topic one of his most successful versions (besides he translated from Plato the *Phaedo*, the *Apology*, the *Crito*, the *Gorgias*, and the initial part of the *Phaedrus*).

Here is Plato's text:

ἐλθόντα δέ με ὁ ταύτη λεγόμενος αὖ βίος εὐδαίμων, Ἰταλιωτικῶν τε καὶ Συρακουσίων τραπεζῶν πλήρης, οὐδαμῇ οὐδαμῶς ἤρεσεν, δῖς τε τῆς ἡμέρας ἐμπιπλάμενον ζῆν καὶ μηδέποτε κοιμώμενον μόνον νύκτωρ, καὶ ὅσα τούτῳ ἐπιτηδεύματα συνέπεται τῷ βίῳ· ἐκ γὰρ τούτων τῶν ἐθῶν οὔτ' ἂν φρόνιμος οὐδεὶς ποτε γενέσθαι τῶν ὑπὸ τὸν οὐρανὸν ἀνθρώπων ἐκ νέου ἐπιτηδεύων δύναίτο—οὐχ οὕτως θαυμαστῇ φύσει κραθήσεται—σώφρων δὲ οὐδ' ἂν μελλήσαι ποτὲ γενέσθαι [...] (Pl. *Ep. VII*, 326b–c)<sup>1</sup>

In the above cited fragment Plato describes his first stay in Sicily. By no means he could get used to the Sicilian customs: sumptuous banquets and luxurious way of life. "For not a single man of all who live beneath the heavens" – he says – "could ever become wise if this were his practices from his youth, since none will be found

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<sup>1</sup> I follow the edition by J. MOORE-BLUNT, Leipzig 1985, Teubner.

to possess a nature so admirably compounded; nor would he ever be likely to become temperate”<sup>2</sup>.

Cicero translates the passage as follows:

*quo cum venissem, vita illa beata, quae ferebatur, plena Italicarum Syracusiarumque mensarum, nullo modo mihi placuit, bis in die saturum fieri nec umquam pernoctare solum ceteraque, quae comitantur huic vitae, in qua sapiens nemo efficitur umquam, moderatus vero multo minus. quae enim natura tam mirabiliter temperari potest? (Cic. Tusc. V, 100, 12)*<sup>3</sup>

Now here is Bruni’s translation:

*Eo cum pervenissem, rursus beata illa que circumferebatur vita Italicarum Sicularumque mensarum plena nequaquam placuit mihi, bisque in die saturum fieri et numquam per noctem iacere solum et quaecumque hanc vitam subsecuntur. Ex huiusmodi quippe moribus nemo omnium, qui sub celo sunt, si ab adolescentia illis innutriatur, quamvis natura optima sit, tamen ad rectam mentem evadere potest; temperatus certe numquam esse curabit [...]*<sup>4</sup>

I pass on to the comparison of the translations:

ἐλθόντα δέ με ὁ ταύτη λεγόμενος αἶ βίος εὐδαίμων...

C.: *quo cum venissem vita illa beata,*      B.: *eo cum pervenissem rursus beata*  
*quae ferebatur*                                      *illa que circumferebatur vita*

Already here we see “the struggle within humanist breast between the authority of the ancients and the desire for originality”<sup>5</sup>. Use of Cicero’s version is evident and Bruni, unwilling to simply reproduce it, introduces changes of little importance, as *eo* instead of *quo*, *pervenissem* instead of *venissem* and *circumferebatur* instead of *ferebatur*. The only modification is rendering of αἶ as *rursus*, in which Bruni, with detriment to style, follows the practice of medieval translators.

...Ἰταλιωτικῶν τε καὶ Συρακουσίων τραπεζῶν πλήρη...

C.: *Plena Italicarum Syracusiarumque*      B.: *Italicarum Sicularumque mensarum*  
*mensarum*    *plena*

Bruni only changes slightly the order of words. Since we do not know the Greek manuscript that he utilized, we can not be sure if *Sicularum* instead of *Συρακουσίων* is an error in Greek transmission or in the Latin copy of Antonio di Mario.

<sup>2</sup> Translation by R. G. BURY, *Plato with an English translation*, vol. VII, London 1942, Loeb.

<sup>3</sup> I follow the edition by M. POHLENZ, Leipzig 1918, Teubner.

<sup>4</sup> The text is derived from Biblioteca Laurenziana’s codex Pluteus LXXVI, 57 – a copy made directly from Bruni’s autograph by Antonio di Mario, a scribe well known in the humanistic circles of Florence.

<sup>5</sup> As J. Hankins said about *Phaedrus*’ passage, in which Bruni also used Cicero’s translation, J. HANKINS, *Plato in the Italian Renaissance*, third impression, Leiden–New York–Köln 1994 (Columbia Studies in the Classical Tradition 17), p. 397.

...οὐδαμῇ οὐδαμῶς ἤρεσεν...

- C.: *nullo modo mihi placuit*                      B.: *nequaquam placuit mihi*  
 Bruni only replaces Cicero's *nullo modo* with equivalent *nequaquam*.

...δὶς τε τῆς ἡμέρας ἐμπιπλάμενον ζῆν...

- C.: *bis in die saturum fieri*                      B.: *bisque in die saturum fieri*

Here the only Leonardo's innovation consists in rendering the conjunction τε. It can be already seen that he attaches more importance to literal translation. I will touch this point more widely in the subsequent part of my article.

...καὶ μηδέποτε κοιμώμενον μόνον νύκτωρ...

- C.: *nec umquam pernoctare solum*                      B.: *et numquam per noctem iacere solum*

Bruni's innovations have little importance and they are motivated by his unwillingness to repeat literally Cicero's version.

...καὶ ὅσα τούτῳ ἐπιτηδεύματα συνέπεται τῷ βίῳ...

- C.: *ceteraque, quae comitantur huic vitae*                      B.: *et quaecumque hanc vitam subsecuntur*

*Quaecumque ... subsecuntur* renders more precisely Greek construction ὅσα... συνέπεται; *subsecuntur* is a synonym of *comitantur*. Bruni is still close to Cicero's version.

...ἐκ γὰρ τούτων τῶν ἐθῶν οὐτ' ἂν φρόνιμος οὐδεὶς ποτε γενέσθαι τῶν ὑπὸ τὸν οὐρανὸν ἀνθρώπων ἐκ νέου ἐπιτηδεύων δύναιτο...

- C.: *in qua [sc.: vita] sapiens nemo efficietur umquam*                      B.: *Ex huiusmodi quippe moribus nemo omnium, qui sub celo sunt, si ab adolescentia illis innutriatur ... tamen ad rectam mentem evadere potest.*

Cicero shortens clearly the passage. He condenses the contents of the sentence, preserving its sense. The only omission to have consequences for the sense is lack of rendering ἐκ νέου ἐπιτηδεύων. Bruni, firstly, is faithful to the original (*Ex huiusmodi ... innutriatur*). Next goes the stylistically inappropriate *tamen*. φρόνιμος ... ποτε γενέσθαι ... δύναιτο is translated freely, because *rectus* ("right", "just") has another meaning than φρόνιμος ("reasonable", "wise"). *Sapiens* used by Cicero is more accurate. Besides, Bruni omits ποτε, that his predecessor rendered as *umquam*.

...οὐχ οὕτως θαυμαστῇ φύσει κραθήσεται...

- C.: *quae enim natura tam mirabiliter temperari potest?*                      B.: *quamvis natura optima sit*

Bruni misunderstands this passage. Cicero renders the sense of κραθήσεται and shifts the fragment further, after the translation of σώφρων δὲ οὐδ' ἂν μελλήσαι ποτὲ γενέσθαι.

...σώφρων δὲ οὐδ' ἂν μελλήσαι ποτὲ γενέσθαι...

C.: moderatus vero multo minus

B.: temperatus certe numquam esse  
curabit

Cicero shortens considerably the text, leaving only the most important information about the lack of sense of measure. Such a condensation is a practice that he often uses in his translations of Greek prose, whenever he wants to point out the most important information, needed at the moment for illustration of a precise argument; sometimes for stylistic reasons.<sup>6</sup> It is worth adding that also in other Plato's passages translated by Cicero there has been noted a tendency to abandon close renderings towards the end of passages.<sup>7</sup>

Bruni uses consciously another equivalent of σώφρων than Cicero.

What conclusions can be drawn from the comparison of these versions? I think that in commenting them we should refer to the theoretical mentions on the art of translation present in the writings of both authors. The Ciceronian way of translation is illustrated by a sentence from his treatise *De optimo genere oratorum*. He speaks about his translations of Aeschines and Demosthenes (not preserved to our times):

*Converti enim ex Atticis duorum eloquentissimorum nobilissimas orationes inter seque contrarias, Aeschinis et Demosthenis; nec converti ut interpretes, sed ut orator, sentiis isdem et earum formis tamquam figuris, verbis ad nostram consuetudinem aptis. In quibus non verbum pro verbo necesse habui reddere, sed genus omne verborum vimque servavi.* (Opt. gen. 14)

„I haven't translated [sc.: Aeschines' and Demosthenes' speeches] as a translator, but as an orator”, he says. *Orator* – means man of letters, master of word. This means not only the choice of words-equivalents, but the mastery of the composition as a whole, of the harmonious and accurate development of the period. Translators who don't observe this rule are called *interpretes indiserti*:

*Nec tamen exprimi verbum e verbo necesse erit, ut interpretes indiserti solent, cum sit verbum quod idem declaret magis usitatum; equidem soleo etiam quod uno Graeci, si aliter non possum, idem pluribus verbis exponere.* (Fin. 3, 15)

These considerations are very important for us also because of the context in which they are put. Namely, Cicero refers to the translation of Greek philosophical doctrines, so his views are not limited to the translations of speeches.

Elsewhere Cicero adds that one should refer to the models of the native stylistic traditions, if one wants to render not only the contents, but also the stylistic

<sup>6</sup> Cicero's adaptations are not limited to shortenings. He often omits entire sentences, sometimes unites several clauses; sometimes he adds the text in order to point out and to unify the content. Instructive examples of such practices are presented in: J. DOMAŃSKI, Some Considerations on the Theory and Practice of Translating in the Latin Linguistic Area, *Przegląd Tomistyczny*, 1 (1984), pp. 140–142.

<sup>7</sup> Por. D. M. JONES, Cicero as a translator, *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies*, VI (1959), pp. 24–26.

values of the original, and the complete stylistic effect (Jerome will mention it in his famous letter *Ad Pammachium de optimo genere interpretandi*<sup>8</sup>):

*Quorum [sc.: Aeschinis et Demosthenis] ego orationes si, ut spero, ita expressero virtutibus utens illorum omnibus, id est sentiis et earum figuris et rerum ordine, verba persequens eatenus, ut ea non abhorreant a more nostro—quae si e Graecis omnia conversa non erunt, tamen ut generis eiusdem sint, elaboravimus—, erit regula, ad quam eorum dirigantur orationes qui Attice volent dicere. (Opt. gen. 23)*

In our passage Cicero is generally faithful to these rules and he translates as an *orator*, for the harmonious construction of clauses and their rhythmic structure is evident, especially at the end: *in qua sapiens nemo efficitur umquam, moderatus vero multo minus. quae enim natura tam mirabiliter temperari potest?* From this and from the stylistic point, Bruni's translation is inferior to that of the ancient writer. The discussed passage, though very short, is a good illustration of Cicero's method *ad sententiam*.

Then, why is his translation of the end of the passage so far removed from the original? The reason, I think, is Cicero's attitude to his own activity of translator. He has always emphasized free character of this activity and his distance to it. He also used to stress that he translated passages of Greek writers when he needed them for his works (cf. *Fin.* 1,7) and that he drew from them freely, as Ennius from Homer or Afranius from Menander. Each translation had to serve as a material for construction of Cicero's own text; this concerns of course also other quotations from Plato used by Cicero.<sup>9</sup>

Scholars, who analysed these quotations, have stated that they were subject of adaptation which aimed at fitting them stylistically and syntactically into the composition of Cicero's text to avoid an impression that the text is derived from another author.<sup>10</sup> Cicero does not try to imitate peculiarities of Plato's syntax, he only renders the sense, fulfilling his own postulate exposed in *De optimo genere oratorum*.

This is the way in which, in my opinion, Cicero's distance from original can be explained. In the already mentioned letter Jerome quotes Cicero's translations from Greek as examples of free translations, with many omissions, additions and changes, caused by the translator's desire of adapting these versions to the peculiarities of Latin. (*Quanta in illis praetermiserit, quanta addiderit, quanta mutaverit, ut proprietates alterius linguae suis proprietatibus explicaret, non est huius temporis dicere.*)

The first humanists adopted Cicero's lessons on translating *ad sententiam*. One of them was Manuel Chrysoloras, Bruni's master, who was of opinion that a translator using the rule *ad verbum* was only seemingly faithful, because the meaning is not

<sup>8</sup> *Ep.* 57, 5.

<sup>9</sup> Here is a representative: 1. *Tusc.* 1, 97–99 = *Ap.* 40c–42a 2. *Tusc.* 5, 34–35 = *Grg.* 470d 3. *Tusc.* 5, 36 = *Mx.* 247e–248a 4. *Cato* 6–9 = *R.* 328e–330a 5. *Off.* 3, 38 = *R.* 359d–360b 6. *Rep.* 1, 66–67 = *R.* 562c 7. *Div.* 1, 60–61 = *R.* 571c–572b 8. *Tusc.* 1, 53–54 = *Phdr.* 245c–246a 9. *Orat.* 41 = *Phdr.* 279 10. *Leg.* 2, 45 = *Lg.* 955e–956b 11. *Leg.* 2, 67–68 = *Lg.* 958d–e 12. *Tusc.* 5, 100 = *Ep.* 326b–c (= the passage analysed here).

<sup>10</sup> For example J. DOMAŃSKI, op. cit., pp. 140–142. The most important studies of Cicero's translations from Plato are: R. PONCELET, *Cicéron, traducteur de Platon*, Paris 1957 and A. TRAGLIA, *Cicero-ne traduttore di Platone e di Epicuro, Studi in onore di V. De Falco*, Napoli 1971.

contained in words, but in larger units – in clauses. Under the influence of these lessons Leonardo Bruni has developed his own method of translating *ad sententiam*, whose aim was to preserve the meaning of the original without losing any of its literary values. Therefore, the translator, apart from linguistic proficiency, had to possess the knowledge of the rhetorical technique and of the history and culture of the period in which the translated author lived; he had to possess also a sophisticated literary taste permitting him to catch and reproduce in his own language peculiarities of the individual style of every author. Such point of view is presented in Bruni's treatise *De interpretatione recta*, entirely dedicated to the problems of the theory of translation:

*Ut enim ii, qui ad exemplum picture picturam aliam pingunt, figuram et statum et ingressum et totius corporis formam inde assumunt nec, quid ipsi facerent, sed, quid alter ille fecerit, meditantur: sic in traductionibus interpres quidem optimus sese in primum scribendi auctorem tota mente et animo et voluntate convertet et quodammodo transformabit eiusque orationis figuram, statum, ingressum coloremque et liniamenta cuncta exprimere meditabitur. Ex quo mirabilis quidam resultat effectus.*

*Nam cum singulis fere scriptoribus sua quedam ac propria sit dicendi figura, ut Ciceroni amplitudo et copia, Sallustio exilitas et brevisitas, Livio granditas quedam subaspera: bonus quidem interpres in singulis traducendis ita se conformabit, ut singulorum figuram assequatur.*<sup>11</sup>

The passage that I am analysing in this paper, though very short, permits making some considerations. First of all, the attempt to reconcile faithfulness to the original with preservation of clarity of the Latin version is manifest. Bruni, therefore, translates some elements omitted by Cicero, though literal or wrong rendering of some Greek particles obscures the translation. In one case (*ad rectam mentem evadere...*) the abandonment of literal rendering, perhaps for stylistic reasons, changes the sense.

Now we can answer the question asked at the beginning of this paper. Leonardo Bruni has obviously used Cicero's translation. Wherever it was faithful, he reproduced it with slight modifications caused by the natural desire for originality, motivated by his aim of adopting the whole of Plato's *Letters* to Latin. Cicero's goal was different; the quotation derived from Plato had firstly to serve as a material for construction of his own text; it had to illustrate the argument presented by Cicero, so that it was treated freely and underwent quite considerable modifications at the end. Since Bruni was not going to incorporate fragments of translation into his own writings, he could not afford such a free approach; therefore, in the final part of the passage the two translators went their own ways.

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<sup>11</sup> *Opere letterarie e politiche di Leonardo Bruni*, a cura di Paolo VITI, Torino 1996, UTET, p. 160.