

Maria SASS, Ștefan BAGHIU, Vlad POJOGA (eds.), *The Culture of Translation in Romania*, Peter Lang, 2018, ISBN 978-3-631-76642-2 (Print), 326 p.

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Translation has always been a key instrument in the development of Romanian literature, crucially involved in the ever-tense relationship between autochthonous artistic and philosophical production and Western culture. Throughout modern history, it has been seen as proof of a marginal artistic landscape depending heavily on foreign aesthetic norms, as a recipe for synchronicity – either literary or ideological – and, more recently, even as a self-colonizing process during populist movements or as an anti-colonization strategy against totalitarian pressure (as discussed by David Morariu in a recent issue of *Transilvania*). Indeed, it can be argued that, nowadays, translation plays a fundamental role in the most heated debates of literary theory, having surpassed the mere controversy of *what makes a literature* and impacting our understanding of hugely significant factors – influence, centrality, market-success, national specificity or gendered language, to name but a few. However, while most Romanian critics over the last two centuries *have* expressed their opinion on the utility, status and methodology of literary transfers between languages and while translation studies have emerged as a standalone discipline over the past few years, proper academic and comprehensive volumes on the history of translation are still absent from the corresponding bibliography. Therefore, *The Culture of Translation in Romania*, a collection of essays edited by Maria Sass, Ștefan Baghiu and Vlad Pojoga answers this particular need for coherent, centralized analyses.

A first section of the book comprises theoretical surveys of translation-related subjects (from ideology and the canon to national mythical figures and subversive narrative structures). Resorting mainly to distant-reading techniques, this chapter offers an indispensable overview of translational trends spanning two centuries. A second part includes case-studies of specific literary renditions, as well as their respective problems

and hidden implications, with a final section allowing translators to give subjective accounts of their work and beliefs regarding translatability and the value of renditions. Thus, the declared purpose of the volume is the reevaluation of Romanian translational phenomena, refuting the view according to which translation is little more than a secondary, pragmatic method of literary distribution.

To begin with, Andrei Terian's overview of Romanian translational patterns between 1829 and 1948 proposes an analysis of a yet unexplored century of literary imports, surveying the critical stances of various theorists, ranging from the conservative Titu Maiorescu and the socialist Constantin Dobrogeanu-Gherea to Iorga, Ibrăileanu and Lovinescu. He shows that, regardless of their divergent ideological agendas, the most vocal autochthonous critics were all in favour of translations, focusing on great canonical works of Western literature at first, but moving on to peripheral literatures and finally debating the very translatability of Romanian texts into foreign languages. Terian wonders why such a vast period of time only produced *microtheories* of translation, arguing that this fragmentary landscape might also be the cause of contemporary disinterest in translational history, concluding that self-awareness regarding Romania's marginal status and an inherent inferiority complex could probably explain these theoretical anomalies. Moreover, this pattern of evolution (opting for different source-literatures and then attempting to disseminate autochthonous texts into a wider cultural sphere) could act, according to the author, as a general framework for understanding peripheral cultures and their reasons for anxiety.

In fact, the following contributors also focus on the same age of Romanian literature: Cosmin Borza conducts a more detailed investigation into the paradox of nationalist critics' promoting translations from peripheral cultures (Hungarian, Scandinavian, Polish, and Lithuanian literatures among them) and explains their choice by highlighting the anti-colonial mechanism run by both the *sămănătorist* and the *poporanist* circles especially in relation to French influences – connecting with other social, economic, and cultural media placed under the pressure of Western colonialism meant forging a stronger national identity. Emanuel Modoc's quantitative analysis then addresses the Romanian reception of Futurism in the first decades of the 20th century – by delving into a huge number of translated texts published in periodicals, he notices that, despite Futurism's virtually inexistent influence on Romanian literature *per se*, the

abundance of borrowed Futurist manifestos indicates a young culture's need for revolutionary, anti-canonical directions in literature. Distant-reading is also employed in Ștefan Baghiu's account of novel translation along four stages of Communism in Romania, which questions both fluctuating quantitative differences between autochthonous production and translated literature, as well as those between Western renditions and Eastern or peripheral ones. Vlad Pojoga, in his turn, authors a quantitative study of poetry translation in post-Communist Romania – an exhaustive analysis of five literary periodicals, mapped chronologically (exploring the post-1989 translation boom, trends regarding chosen texts, gender disparities) and geographically (the prevalent source-cultures are found to be canonized literatures or neighboring ones, which have already developed a localized tradition and gained symbolic capital).

It must be said that these macro-analyses, with their mathematical precision lent by algorithms and their vast historical overviews, are neither gratuitous exercises of interdisciplinarity, nor simply didactic summaries of the evolution of translation. Designed as academic papers on well-determined historical sectors or methodological issues, the articles inevitably stumble into much more intricate polemics of contemporary theory. Baghiu's essay, for instance, tackles vaster issues than its core theme (novel rendition under Communism), namely the function of translated literature in measuring world-system dynamics and in clarifying the position of each culture according to its economic power and relationship to core-literatures (as understood by Wallerstein and then developed by Franco Moretti). This broader discussion scope is, in fact, characteristic to all of the theoretical contributions to the volume's first section, be it explicit or not. Each of the aforementioned articles transcends isolated subjects of local literary reception or national evolution, dissecting theoretical entanglements such as the question of artistic influences, the conjunction or disjunction between literature and ideology, the development of peripheral cultures in the shadow of central ones, but at the same time in close familiarity with other marginal literatures, or the possibility of extracting new schemas of literary periodization from the study of renditions.

Consequently, one of the merits of such incursions into the field of translation resides in their ability to destabilize critical clichés. Cosmin Borza, for instance, mentions the widespread conviction that fighting cultural mediocracy and isolation can only happen through (often voluntary) links with so-called *major* literatures and

counters the myth with multiple instances of cross-marginal solidarity. Emanuel Modoc, too, questions the validity of Adrian Marino's thesis about certain Romanian regions having been more prone to avant-garde influences than others. Although Futurism was indeed successful especially in southern publications, this theory, Modoc argues, only accounts for the permeability of the region to translated texts, but not for the presence of Futurism in Romania since its beginnings – other factors (Symbolism's obsolescence, a lack of other theoretical options, the novelty of the movement) are better suited to explain Futurism's journey to Romania.

Besides this deconstructive endeavour, the same essays contain nuanced commentaries on the many contradictions accumulated in Romanian literary history. Ștefan Baghiu points out an unexpected result of socialist realism, more precisely the fact that diminishing Anglo-American renditions (which would have become the norm, had the post-war political transition brought no ideological upheavals) also caused an accentuation of the French influence on autochthonous literature, notwithstanding that the selected texts obviously belonged to the realist canon (Jules Verne, Balzac). On the other hand, Vlad Pojoga shows that, despite the stable conclusions of his quantitative approach, translations of poetry in literary magazines after the fall of Communism are not part of a systematic process, but are determined by volatile factors – editorial, human, political – a situation perpetuated into present days. Likewise, when Alex Goldiș discusses subversive prose under Communist rule, he chooses to focus on the more problematic period of Thaw literature, in which realist socialist homogeneity – reflected in theme selection as well as in narrative continuity – gave way to innovations in the field of expression and to implicit ideological nuances (subjective character voices, irony, self-referentiality, polysemous language that exposed the artificiality of the Stalinist utopia as featured in fiction, etc). Remarkably, the study is a comparative one, expanding to multiple Soviet-dominated cultures, from Romanian literature to Czech and Polish prose and thus shedding light on otherwise little explored formal similarities.

Finally, the prevalence of quantitative methods in this first section is easily noticeable. With distant-reading, one not only surpasses the risks of impressionistic criticism, but they can also rely on an instrument of centralization in the study of otherwise dispersed phenomena (various publications and periodicals, multiple editions, unclear trends of growth or diminution that can be erroneously interpreted

according to personal bias). Last but not least, a quantitative approach is arguably the most suitable for tracing influences and literary imports in a given period of time, managing multiple sets of variables – the origin of the text, of the authors and the translator, the amplitude of a certain edition etc. Visual representations (such as graphs and maps) are, thus, useful for establishing the data of an investigation and the subsequent conclusions, especially when the concepts involved (power, fame, centrality, impact, normative value) are abstract ones.

As for the second and the third chapters, their areas of research are obviously more specialized. Stefan Sienerth writes about the numerous translations from Romanian interwar literature authored by Wolf von Aichelburg. Maria Sass draws connections between the same two cultures (Romanian and German), while conducting a genetic enquiry into the impact of German types of writing on George Coşbuc's own style and formal choices, subsequently investigating his activity as a translator and paying special attention to his rendition of the *Divine Comedy*. Ioana Constantin also performs a micro-analysis of Lucian Blaga's translation of *Faust*, while Anca-Simina Martin focuses on a comparison between transpositions of Shakespeare's multi-linguistic bawdy wordplays in 1955-1963 and 2017 respectively, contrasting an ideologically-impacted rendition that missed many of the original puns with the recent version, where telescope-words and English implants are used to preserve the humorous content. However, the apparent technicality of these articles does not imply that their relevance is strictly local, temporary or methodological. Instead, broader issues are at stake. For instance, Ioana Constantin comments on the tension between *covert translations*, poetic re-writings of foreign texts, molded according to the target-culture's specificity and the more recent directions in translation studies, concerned with respecting the source's original traits. Martin, too, is interested in what a *foreignizing translation* actually involves, as the very nature of inter-language transfers seems to have changed in the wake of globalization. Meanwhile, Iulia Elena Giță advocates artistic coherence and revitalization through translation and cinematographic adaption rather than fidelity to the source-text, choosing Yu Hua's best-selling novel, *Huózhe*, as an example of globalized fiction that can help distant cultures understand humanist China.

The same can be said about Cătălina Stanislav's insights into gendered translations of sexual language from English to Romanian: her conclusions regarding female translators' tendency to distance themselves from strong sexual content is obviously linked to problems such as power, female agency and sexuality, conformity and nonconformism. At the same time, Andreea Coroian-Goldiș searches for an explanation in the successful case of what she terms *editorial fiction* (French and Romanian prose that combines the construction of intimacy and subjectivity with social themes) – a genre that has brought national literatures onto the global scene, playing a central role in the circuit of translation and highlighting the actuality of certain moral and societal universal dilemmas. Trans-national literary success constitutes a core-aspect of Ovio Olaru's essay, as well, as he sets out to measure the presence of Scandinavian Noir novels in Germany and to prove that their presence on the Romanian book market and in other peripheral cultures widely depends on previous Western reception patterns, since translations into marginal languages only ensue after international acclaim has been established commercially. A different perspective is then put forward by Alex Ciorogar, whose main thesis refers to the new nature of translation in an age of digital globalization – collective literary practices, algorithms that subvert the concept of originality or inspiration, a wider re-distribution of rendition possibilities due to the internet. These factors require, in Ciorogar's view, the reinvention of translation, which cannot be viewed anymore as a matter of re-creation versus imitation.

The last chapter records both the personal experience of various translators from and into Romanian (their motivation, technical difficulties, solutions) and the utility of the translational process for extracting the philosophical or ideological under-structures of the given texts. George State's essay on his Romanian version of Paul Celan's poetry is just one such example, as the translator views his long-term endeavour as a difficult attempt at comprehension and only then as a pragmatic technique of inter-language transfer. State also distances himself from the well-known dichotomy between translators of poetry who create rather than simply re-word and those whose fidelity to the original seems to prove their lack of talent or ability. In Celan's case, his translator writes, meaning is inextricably connected to formal choices, forcing a translator devoted to the wording to simultaneously demonstrate creativity. In Radu Vancu's case, the

translator of some of Ezra Pound's poems, delving into this *Maximalist's* oeuvre enabled a clearer perspective on the Poundian creative principle – this would be, in Vancu's opinion, the universal power of poetic language, stemming from ancient Greece and touching upon all lyrical spaces and ages. Identifying the three main values of Poundian poetry (tradition or intertextuality, anarchism and imagery), Vancu uses them as guidelines for contemporary poets, whose mission could still be to create *an enormous resonating device* that makes all beauty accessible. Finally, another article is to be mentioned, as it explores translation's impact on present-day cultural networks: Sunhild Galter writes about the literature and journalistic texts of Luminița Mihai Cioabă, translated into German by Beatrice Ungar. This Roma writer's ambitions are wide-ranging, as she strives to expose the persecution of Roma citizens during WWII, to make their traditions known to a Western readership and, at the same time, to preserve an oral language already forgotten by some of the Roma people themselves.

It is, therefore, by no means an exaggeration to say that the coedited volume of Maria Sass, Ștefan Baghiu and Vlad Pojoga fills more than one gap in Romanian literary studies. It is, of course, pioneer work in terms of translational history, covering various ages of Romanian literature, different genres and employing both distant-reading techniques (geocriticism, quantitative methods) and micro-analyses, to be found in the various case-studies of the second section. It also caters for diverse perspectives on the process of mediating between languages, exposing the subjective experience of six translators. However, it is my contention that the volume's greatest strength resides in the subtle nuances, in-depth, well-documented and well-argued discourse of each and every contributor: the fact that all articles ask and then answer difficult questions regarding conflictual areas in contemporary theory (the problem of influences, centre-periphery competition, colonial movements and cultural resistance, political ideology and its presence in the arts, subversion, the digitalization of translational methods – the list could definitely go on) only serves to confirm the unbreakable bond between translation studies and the vaster field of world literature.