

## Translation and Dissemination in PostCommunist Romanian Literature

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**Abstract.** Translation is a fundamental part of cultural dissemination. Based on an empirical qualitative research, the first part of this article presents the effects that the wave of translations after 2005, the first of utmost importance in the Romanian cultural environment, engaged in the local literary field, and in the second part there are brought into discussion some important intercultural barriers in translation and promotion of literature abroad, such as defining literature in a different way, new forms of censorship or problematic semiotic codes of literature of revolt.

**Keywords:** cultural differences, aesthetic canon, translation, the writer's condition, east-west

### INTRODUCTION

Among the many ways of intercultural communication and mutual understanding of cultural environments, the translation of literary works is one that cannot be eluded. My aim in this article is to discuss the issue of translation and promotion of Romanian literature abroad, mainly through the problematization of the effects that this type of cultural communication entails on the system of literary values and of the obstacles that arise because of cultural differences

Invariably – and not only in the Romanian literary environment, but in all those in which creation is not in a world language – the number of translations from other languages overwhelmingly exceeds that of translations into other languages or, in Valérie Ganne's terms and Marc Mignon's (1992), *intraductions* prevail over *extraductions*. Therefore, in such literary environments, if a truly intercultural communication is desired, and not a unidirectional flux of language, then special measures need to be taken regarding translations and promotion. In Romania, the policy of stimulating foreign translations has a very poor history. In the interwar period there wasn't a particular interest from the state or professional/cultural associations for the promotion of literature abroad; during the

totalitarian regime, although there was a relatively large number of translations, they were made especially for propaganda or political-clientele (except for writers in exile), and in the first fifteen years after the Collapse of Communism there were registered rather small successes, based on personal relationships. Never till 2005, the Romanian Cultural Institute started developing a set of programs for the promotion of culture abroad and to train translators, and Romanian publishers, especially Polirom, started taking action<sup>1</sup> in promoting their own authors on the international book market. Therefore, the period after 2005 is characterized by the largest number of translations in the entire cultural history of Romania, with a faster increase in its first years and a slowdown after 2010, when the effects of the economic crisis are felt.

Most of the empirical data underlying this study are based on the results of the qualitative participant-observation research. During 2004–2011, I attended many workshops, book fairs, translation workshops, meetings with editors and I myself exchanged letters with translators, in various languages. Thus, in the effort of theorizing the subject investigated, starting from empirical data, in the spirit of the Chicago School, we analyzed fieldnotes, observations from the researcher journal, many informal conversations with writers, translators, cultural managers, booksellers, librarians, email dialogues or interviews published in magazines and newspapers.

## INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION AND THE (RE) NEGOTIATION OF LITERARY VALUES

The translation of a large number of literary works, most of them belonging to contemporary authors, in a relatively short period of time, is a first in the Romanian cultural environment. The reactions in the press were very powerful and a number of consequences have begun to be felt in the literary field, which we will mention below.

One of the most important consequences is the establishment of a *European dimension of the Romanian writer's condition*. Although there are a few authors that have been translated into several languages so far, they rather were seen as exceptions; nowadays, having your work published in another country begins to be felt as something normal, as a legitimate aspiration, even for a beginner. Having in view that during the totalitarian regime the entire literary career was nationally conceived, the current

state of affairs is a real change in mentality. Meanwhile, the presence of Romanian literary works in the international cultural environment has increased considerably, and I mean not only the number of books translated into various languages, but also magazines dedicated to Romanian literature, anthologies or the fact that Romania is a country invited to various book fairs or literary festivals. Also, Romanian writers have begun to realize that what they write reaches a foreign audience and literary critics with different cultural background, unfamiliar with Romanian aesthetic canon.

That the new wave of translations does not come from a sudden illumination of foreign publishers in front of the Romanian literary values, but from a promotion policy (of the Romanian Cultural Institute/The National Books Centre, and various publishing houses), from a political context (Romania accession to the EU) or from a broader cultural context (the success of the new wave of Romanian cinema) is likely to *problematicize the dominant definition of literature, an aesthetic-escapist one*. Subsidiarily, the resources of the literary values or of the aesthetic canon are being surveyed.

By making the Romanian literature known to the world, *a new instance of national consecration at national level is legitimated*, on the background of a crisis of recognition instances after the fall of dictatorship in 1989 (see Gheorghiu, 2007: 287–306 and Lungu, 2004: 94–103). Not a few of the young writers, especially of those from the province, think that they can be more easily validated in their country after they register an international success. One's recognition abroad is seen as an important resource in building a literary career at national level, a resource that can also annihilate the "handicap" of living in the province, far from the mechanisms of power. Subsidiarily, one can "read" the belief that Western literary world is more democratic and correct in the legitimacy process than the Romanian one. Also, being translated is considered an important asset to the local reader, a consumer of foreign literature mainly, and less Romanian. Facilitating a European statute for the Romanian writer comes in a moment when he has already lost its importance in front of his own readers,<sup>2</sup> and the European extension can help them regain, within certain limits, the esteem they once had.

The European/international visibility or success, as a new instance of acquiring consecration, not only multiplies the mechanisms of creating a literary value, but it also encounters the classic quasi-monopolistic in-

stance during the dictatorship, the literary criticism, that fought against the political power with the weapon of pure aesthetics, of art for art's sake. Literary criticism is itself in a period of redefining its status, and the new instance of consecration is not always appreciated.<sup>3</sup> Those writers who are translated abroad are sometimes perceived as being out of their critical jurisdiction, and the preferences of local critics, built to a large extent on the national aesthetic canon, are not always in line with the appreciations Romanian writers receive abroad, creating conflicts of interpretation. Finally, we can say that the new wave of translations contributes to *a redefinition and repositioning of the critical assessment in the Romanian literary field*.

As a conclusion, the significant wave of translations of Romanian literature abroad began in 2005, having the consequences listed above, and it represents a new challenge for the Romanian literary field, having an important role in the (re)construction of literary values. This adds to other phenomena with similar effects, after the fall of the dictatorship: the abolition of censorship, a literary canon revised, recovery of literature written while in exile, the apparition of a new contestatory generation of writers, intense translation of foreign literature (that provided new aesthetic models for the Romanian writers and new assessing criteria for the local ones), the rediscovery of the general public, the opening of writers' secret police files. In the literary field, so disturbed after 1989, the national aesthetic canon is reconsidered, creating great tensions.

#### LITERARY TRANSLATION AND THE MANAGEMENT OF CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

There is not a novelty that the translation of a literary text from one language to another, the transfer from one cultural environment to another, raises the most various problems, from the vocabulary or style, to the comprehension of attitudes, behaviour, mentality or measurability of the system of values the text subtends. Translation studies are full of dilemmas, examples and disputes. In the the following paragraphs, I will only systematize some personal observations made during the field research between 2005–2011 regarding the intercultural barriers encountered in translating and promoting Romanian literature abroad. I will certainly not exhaust the number of such obstacles, but I think the few divisions brought into attention outline the relationship between the Romanian

literary environment and the Western one, and to some extent to the east-west one.

### 3.1. What we are talking about when we talk about literature

The reluctance of major Western publishers to the Romanian literature, Bulgarian, Serbian and other small countries' in the region<sup>4</sup> is a fact that everyone responsible of copyright issues admits, and many explanations revolve around the bad image of those countries or lack of Western public interest in the literature that comes from this area. Beyond these macrosocial explanations that have their degree of relevance, I've always tried to understand what is going on looking at this matter *from inside* the literary field. A completely fortuitous conversation with one of the most active young translators from Romania helped me clarify an issue that seems crucial to me now. There's no secret that the translators, especially those translating from small languages also play the role of literary agents, and so they assiduously make contacts in the publishing industry. The young translator had just returned from a meeting with an important editor and was upset because her third translation proposal was categorically rejected. She was more upset because the representative of the publishing house seemed very open, even friendly, eager to publish a Romanian writer, therefore a *rara avis*, but always reproaching the same thing: that brings "experimental texts." It seemed strange because she suggested books which in Romania are labeled as good novels, that received favourable literary critics and that have been a success, in no way extreme innovations.

Corroborating this information with my previous research on the Romanian literary field,<sup>5</sup> I realized that when talking about literature, Romanian writers/editors and literary critics, and Western editors talk about rather different things, and have different dominant definitions of literature, because literary fields have evolved differently in the former communist countries and the West. In Romania the definition of literature as art for art's sake is still very strong, forged under the dictatorship from tactical reasons, the autonomy of the literary field being continuously threatened by censorship and political power. The exacerbation of the aesthetic definition of literature was absolutely necessary at first, to limit the propaganda function of literature, and later, when the political power wanted to annihilate the subversive capacity of literature rather than use it for political education, the aestheticism became

a mere form of escapism or tolerance of the regime oppression. In a literary field dominated by such a definition, the general public is deprived of almost any contribution in the construction of literary value, and literary criticism – studying par excellence the history of national literary forms, of the mechanisms through which literature gives birth to literature, without vulgare adhesions to the environment – becomes the supreme judge in matters of literature. Authors literary socializing under the influence of this definition of literature have acquired a natural tendency towards innovation and a fundamental lack of qualified communication with the public. Their literature is addressed rather to the “narrow field” in terms of Pierre Bourdieu, it leads toward the avant-garde expression, that is exactly the narrow space where literary revolutions are born. Each is prepared and willing to reinvent literature, being convinced that a perfect grasp of literary means is enough for this. Of course, here we have designed an ideal pattern, from which the real writers deviate more or less. The fact is that this type of author is not exactly what a big Western publisher is looking for, and I do not refer to the bestsellers manufacturers here, but the editors with cultivated taste, fond of literature in the best sense of the word. The evolution of Western literary field evolved rather to a relative autonomy of the aesthetic value, which is preserved in the continuous battle with merchantability and economic constraints. That is why the public, even in case of “good” literature, has an active role in the construction of aesthetic value, and the editorial system tends to publish books that meet success from both the literary critics and the public. Following the same theoretical line, inevitably when you design typologies, I would say that the author from the former communist countries, familiar with the aesthetic definition of literature, rather seeks to make a literary revolution, while the Western author, socialized in the spirit of aesthetic heteronomy, aims to gain both artistic performance and success. This does not mean we will not find aesthetes in Western countries, and in former communist countries reader-oriented writers, but we refer to dominant trends and mechanisms of legitimacy in their artistic fields. That’s how I explained myself the editor’s reaction to the proposals of the young translator.

### 3.2. Censorship is dead, long live censorship!

I will continue the above mentioned ideas, in order to study an interesting cultural difference regarding the interaction between Romanian writers and the Western editorial system. For an author who embraces the aesthetic definition of literature, his text, once completed, becomes intangible. It's a jewelry polished to the last watermark, a mechanism thought to the smallest wheel or even the result of divine inspiration. To change a comma or suppress a phrase is an impiety. To this representation on the literary work – unique, inspired and intangible – the writer from the former communist countries adds the experience, sometimes traumatic, of political censorship, often made even by the book editor. This double conditioning makes him very careful, almost obsessed with the integrity of his own text.

In this context, the contact with Western publishers, for whom the text is often an object of discussion and negotiation with the editor, is a surprising and often unpleasant experience. The more important the publisher is, the more unavoidable these negotiations seem to be. Romanian well-known writers have finally agreed to have chapters of their books suppressed from different reasons, more or less commercial, and a young writer confessed that a prestigious American publisher rearranged chapters of his novel to give linearity to the action, betraying his intention to make action more sophisticated according to the readers taste. Such editorial practices are perceived as abusive and hardly acceptable, some kind of price paid to escape the anonymity of a small country and enter the international literary stage. Following this experience, the great disillusionment of the authors is that literature, indeed, in the West is strongly desacralized and the freedom the authors who escaped dictatorship dreamed of deal with a new „censorship”, which is rarely subject of discussion.

### 3.3. Problematic codes of post-communist literature

The abolition of political censorship in the literary field, after the collapse of the dictatorship, made possible the free expression of various forms of artistic expression, the new generations taking advantage of it. Words, languages, attitudes or themes that had been tightly controlled by the political power, after 1989, have been integrated quickly into the writers' concerns. Sexuality, homoeroticism, deconstruction of nationalism and patriotism of the parade, the misery of everyday life under com-

munism, childhood during dictatorship, throes of transition to democracy and market economy are some of the favorite themes. Concerning attitude, the new generation explores anger, sarcasm, disgust, bitter laughter, dark humor, despair, brutality, cruelty and, last but not least, insolence, exertion and blase. As far as language is concerned, the means of expression until recently forbidden are recovered: the juvenile or prison jargon, imprecations and grotesque, aggressive oral verbosity or slum, sexuality, etc. To the socialist realism in the first years of dictatorship, and the civil and politically sterilized realism, in its last years, to the escapist aestheticism it opposes a black literature, grotesque, angry, brutal, inspired by the moral and social ruins of the former regime, a post-traumatic literature.

The translation of such literature raises a lot of difficulties. First, most Romanian translators, most often educated during the political opening of dictatorship, the late '60s and '70s, have a certain age and most of them prefer classic authors, of incontestable value, and less the new authors of contestatory literature. It took nearly fifteen years, since the fall of the old regime, to appear a new generation of translators who share a taste for the new literature and to promote it with enthusiasm. Secondly, Western publishers are very concerned with the taste and idiosyncrasies of the readers they address to. Although Western literary language and limited literary field accept the codes of contestatory literature without any reserve, the general public may show reticence regarding, for example, the degree of vulgarity and violence of expression, even if they are used for aesthetic purpose. Also, the ideological reading templates can offer new negotiation issues on the text. For example, a scene of cruelty to animals, although in the novel it captures well the barbarism of a social environment, can be considered as problematic for the Western reader.

Hence, the dominant definition of literature that a generation of translators operates with, when this is homogeneous, the sensitivity of Western reader concerning ethical issues and manners and its ideological options are sources of problematization of translation and promotion of post-communist literature that we identified in the field research.

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#### Notes

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<sup>1</sup> That is, for example, publishing catalogs in English for various book fairs, creating a specialized website, presenting excerpts, translated into English, to the foreign publishers, giving support for attending lectures and workshops abroad, etc.

<sup>2</sup> From *Reading Habits of Romanians*, report IRES 2011, we find out that 79% of book readers do not have a favourite contemporary Romanian author.

<sup>3</sup> For example, besides the classical critical verdict, the chronicles started to contain accusations or insinuations that it's just a book “written for export” or “to have success abroad.” Sometimes, Romanian critics feel threatened by the prestige of reviews from abroad, published in major European publications, that are cited more often on the fourth cover of the Romanian reprints. One must know that having opinions cited on the back cover is a very important source of professional prestige for a critic, especially in Romania, where under the quoted fragment it is written not (only) the title of the publication, but mainly or only the name of the critic.

<sup>4</sup> In fact, it is not just the problem of the countries in the region, but also of all “small” countries, whose language is not internationally/widely spoken and literary tradition having mainly national relevance. But some former communist countries share a few common features, different from other small countries. In *Republica mondială a literelor* (2007), Pascale Casanova notes: “Though universalist literary belief agrees that “in art there are no foreigners,” in reality national attachment is one of the most burdensome constraints felt by writers; indeed, the more dominated the country, the more constraining it is” (Casanova, 2007: 228). Or: “the smallness, poverty, “backwardness,” and remoteness of these literary worlds render the writers who live in them – imperceptible in the strict sense – to international literary author-

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ities. This invisibility and remoteness appear clearly to those writers on the periphery who are “internationally recognized” and therefore able to evaluate precisely the position in the hierarchy of world literature” (Casanova, 2007: 230).

<sup>5</sup> Especially in *Construcția identității într-o societate totalitară. O cercetare sociologică asupra scriitorilor*. Iași: Junimea, 2003.