LITERARY TRANSLATION FLOWS FROM ROMANIAN INTO ENGLISH: A SOCIO-ECONOMIC PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: According to the sociological model advanced by Johan Heilbron, literary translation is part of a wider cultural system which relies on a centre-margin type of structure, and accounts for the unequal cultural exchanges and the subsequent unequal translation flows between various linguistic groups (Heilbron). In other words, the number of translations produced from/ into a particular language depends on the position that the respective language (or literature) occupies at world level, whether it holds a central or a marginal position, acquiring the status of major/ minor language.
Starting from these assumptions, this paper purports to examine the literary translation flows from Romanian into English, in the context of globalisation and the supremacy of English, phenomena leading to the reconsideration of cultural identity in the case of "minor" languages and cultures, also illustrated through the translation and publishing practices.

Keywords: translation, cultural asymmetry, minor vs. major cultures, globalisation, international cultural system.

As posited by the representatives of the socio-economic direction in Translation Studies (G. Sapiro, 2008; J. Heilbron, 2007, 2008), literary translation is part of a wider cultural system, which functions as a centre versus margin type of structure, and which may explain the unequal cultural exchanges between various linguistic groups. Additionally, this centre-periphery dichotomy further accounts for the unequal translation flows between various cultures (Heilbron, 2008).

Thus, from a socio-economic perspective (J. Heilbron and G. Sapiro, 2007) it can be argued that in the relation between the source and the target culture and the subsequent circulation of texts, ideas and people can be assimilated, on a global level, to the economic, political or language system. From this stance, it can be inferred that the translation and publishing practices derive not only from the intrinsic properties of the source and target cultures, but also from their specific position in the world, from power relations, from issues of cultural authority (A. Lefevere, 1992). Similarly, in *Translation and Empire. Postcolonial Theories Explained* (1997), Douglas Robinson posits that hegemonic relations between cultures have always been present, and cultural asymmetries have operated between cultural spaces worldwide, sometimes without necessarily involving political colonisation (a case in point is, for instance, the supremacy of the "strong" Western European cultures over the "weaker" ones on the same continent; equally, this can be extrapolated to the way in which Romania, a former Communist country, has responded to the supremacy of English). Moreover, the existence of cultural hegemonies will inevitably lead to disproportionate translation ratios.

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This issue has been explored extensively by Lawrence Venuti (1992, 1995) who is interested specifically in the disproportionate volumes of translation into and from English, given that, after Wold War II, English has been the most widely translated language in the world, while the number of translations into English has dropped significantly.

Interested in the dynamics of translation flows between various linguistic groups, Heilbron argues that "dominant languages and core language groups tend to have low translation ratios as compared to less dominant languages and more peripheral language groups" (2008: 188). The dichotomy "dominant – less dominant language groups", functioning according to a core-periphery structure describing the international system of translations, can be used in order to account for the "uneven flow of translations between language groups, as well as the varying role of translations within language groups" (Ibidem).

As argued by Heilbron, the distribution of book translations by language suggests that the international translation system is a 4-level structure in which 55 to 60 % of all book translations are made from a single language (which is, obviously – English); this means, in terms of a core-periphery model, that English dominates the global market, occupying a hypercentral position. English is followed by two languages that occupy a central position: German and French, each of them having a share of about 10% of the global translation market. At the third level, 7 or 8 languages occupy a semi-central position, having a share of 1 to 3 % of the world market (examples include Spanish, Italian and Russian).

Finally, the fourth level includes all the other languages from which are made less than 1% of the book translations worldwide. These languages can be considered to be 'peripheral' in the international translation economy, even though some of them count a very large number of speakers (countries like China, Japan, or the Arabic states).

Romania is obviously relegated to this fourth level, peripheral both at European level (as a former Communist state) and at world level – judging by its positioning in Europe, a continent which also occupies a minor position as compared to the United States of America. Speaking about the commercial balance between Europe and the United States, the director of the American PEN, Michael Moore (J. Harris, 2007), states that "it is ridiculous, since only 3% of the published books in the US are works in translation", while in Romania, for instance, translations represent over 50% of the books on the market.

Acknowledging this disproportionate distribution of translation flows, and motivated by the view that reading literature from other cultural spaces is essential to preserving a vibrant book culture and to increasing cultural exchanges, the University of Rochester launched the website *Three Percent* (2007) [1]. Convinced that in this age of globalization, translation is one of the best ways to preserve the uniqueness of cultures and that, in order to remain among the world's best educated readers, English speakers must have access to the world's great literatures, *Three Percent* brings information on the goings-on in international literature, provides reviews and samples of books in translation. The website draws its name from the unfortunate fact (the editors argue) that only about 3% of all books published in the United States are translations. And since the 3% figure includes all books in translation, the number in terms of literary fiction and poetry is actually closer to 0.7%.

From this same perspective, in an article probing the nature of literary exchanges between so-called major and minor cultures, Zauberga (2000:49) challenges the view according to which translation is a mere manipulative tool used by the major culture to domesticate the "cultural

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other", arguing that translation into a major language can also serve as a gateway through which minor cultures may reach out. Thus, she provides the example of a Latvian anthology published in English translation to show that English is no longer seen as an instrument of power, but rather as a tool for cross-cultural communication. Thus, Zauberga argues that in this new context "translation investigates asymmetries and power relations that surround the text, responding to them in many ways". (2000:49) She further points out that, with the increasing role that English plays in international communication, it might "lose track of its cultural identity and turn into a reduced 'plastic' language" (Snell-Hornby, 1997: 30), and no longer be perceived as a tool of power. The asymmetry can be thus played to the advantage of the minority culture.

As regards the way in which Romania managed to respond and resist to the power asymmetries on the international book market, some people support the idea that we should focus on exporting our "specificity", our local, strictly "Romanian" values, while others state that we can stir the interest only through forms that are 100% international, cosmopolite and "à la mode", through copies of the recipes that are successful nowadays worldwide. Apparently different, both categories illustrate the same marginality complex, according to which, being "peripheral", we should promote picturesque, "exotic" authors, or disguise in "westerns". Literary critic Nicolae Manolescu (2009), president of the USR (Romanian Writers' Association) and ambassador of Romania to UNESCO, argues that we should count on the translation of "live" authors, on contemporaries, i.e. on writers such as Dan Lungu, or Filip Florian, rather than on Slavici. "We should move on to another type of politics, a more aggressive one in this field and not go on with the shy one we're practicing at the moment", states Manolescu, adding that "in the end we will find a successful writer who will pull the others, just like an engine" (2009).

However, success is not a question of value, but a question of marketability. Foreign editors and publishing houses are looking for books that are likely to be sold. Contemporary authors are easier to present and promote; they can be invited to literary events, public readings, they are generally much more appealing to the general public than a classical author, no matter how valuable (s)he might be. Promoting classical, canonical writers would mean, from a commercial point of view, restricting the targeted audience. Moreover, as writer Dan Lungu[1] also points out, classical Romanian literature could be best promoted in academic environments, through university publishing houses. As Dan Lungu further posits, several factors contribute to the promotion of the Romanian literature abroad, each of them to a different, and yet equally important extent –the author, the publisher and the literary agent (an institution almost absent in Romania, especially as far as the "export" of literature is concerned). In Dan Lungu's opinion, the function of the literary agent is fulfilled in Romania by the translator (who has the ability to submit translations and publishing proposals to publishers) and, sometimes, by the authors themselves (through participations in public readings, festivals, book fairs, or residency programs, authors sometimes recommending one another to publishers).

In order to account for the way in which Romania responded to the power asymmetries on the international book market, and the literary translation flows from Romanian into English in the post-Communist period, we relied on a variety of sources. More precisely, in our attempt to account for the number of literary translations published in English after the fall of the

[1] Personal communication with writer Dan Lungu, June 8, 2012.

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Communist regime, we created a database of the literary works translated into English during the above mentioned period.

Thus, we started to build our database by counting the translations facilitated by two important institutionalised initiatives in Romania, namely the projects carried out by the Romanian Cultural Institute and the Observer Translation Project and the *Contemporary Romanian Writers*, a project initiated by the Polirom Publishing House. These findings were complemented by a research in the online catalogues of some important libraries in Great Britain, the United States of America and Canada. Thus, for Great Britain, we took into consideration the *British Library* (the national library) and five other university libraries: *Oxford*, *University College London (UCL)*, *Cambridge*, *Manchester* and *Edinburgh*; for the United States of America, the libraries we took into consideration were: *the Library of Congress* (national library), *Harvard University Library*, *Yale University Library*, *Princeton University Library* and *Stanford University Library*; and, finally, for Canada, we took into consideration the following university libraries: *Ottawa*, *Montréal*, *Quebec*, *the University of British Columbia (UBC)* and *Toronto*. Our research took into consideration only the translated prose, leaving aside other literary genres. We were particularly interested in finding out how many literary prose works were translated into English in the period after the fall of the Communist Regime, and who were the most translated authors.

Additionally, another important source for identifying translations into English for the chosen period was the statistics carried out by the **Index Translationum** [2] – a list of books translated throughout the world, i.e. an international bibliography of translations created by UNESCO in 1932.

One of the most notable contributions to the promotion of Romanian literature in the post-Communist period was made by the Romanian Cultural Institute (RCI) [3], especially through the series of financing programmes carried out, aimed to present Romania and the Romanian culture: *TPS* (Translation and Publication Support Programme), *20 authors*, *Publishing Romania*, and the scholarship programme for new and professional translators of Romanian literature.

Since 2005, when it begun its publishing activity, the Romanian Cultural Institute has published 337 books, by 134 authors, and belonging to 15 genres. The translated volumes were published at 185 publishing houses from 30 countries and in 24 languages [3]. English is the preferred language for translation, with 45 titles translated, followed by Spanish (39) and French (32) [3], demonstrating the tendency to move towards the centre, towards the internationally recognised *lingua franca*, in order to increase visibility.

As far as the *poetics* (Lefevere, 1992) involved in the choice of works to be translated is concerned, the prevalent literary genre is *prose* (148 titles) followed by *culture and civilization* (35 tiles), and *poetry* (32). This could also be explained by the fact that prose (and especially the novel) is generally the worldwide dominant form of literary expression. Poetry remains of course an important genre, but in terms of economic reality, number of copies and circulation, or considering the practice of reading, it occupies a marginal place as compared to prose. And this issue of literary genre is also taken into consideration in the present day debates on the shaping of the new Romanian literary canon.

Another important question is related to the preliminary norms/ translation policies (Toury, 1995) dictating the translation, that is, to what we should export. The most widely

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translated author from the Romanian Cultural Institute's list is Mircea Cărtărescu, with 14 titles, followed by Dan Lungu (12), Dumitru Ţepeneag (10), Filip Florian (9) Gabriela Adameşteanu and Mircea Eliade (8), Norman Manea (7), etc[2].

Most of these authors belong either to the Romanian Modernism, or they are contemporary Romanian writers. Nevertheless, some of the Romanian classical writers, such as Mihai Eminescu or Mateiu Caragiale, have also been translated, some of them being already available in several languages.

Another notable example of translation and promotion initiative is that of the *Observator Cultural* magazine, namely the **Observer Translation Project (OTP)** [4]**,** launched in 2008, an international magazine of translated Romanian writing, presenting previously untranslated fiction. The project's declared aim is to "highlight a 'pilot' author each month", in order to provide the potential foreign reader interested in Romanian literature with a database of Romanian writers, updates on Romanian writing published abroad, as well as critical reactions to Romanian works. Described on signandsight.com as "the fantastic translation project" [5], OTP translates into English, Dutch French, German, Italian, Spanish and Polish, leaving also room for guest languages.

The project does not promote publishing houses, but authors and, as in the case of RCI, the focus is rather on contemporary authors, untranslated so far in any foreign languages (such as, for instance, Mircea Horia Simionescu, Mircea Nedelciu, Ştefan Agopian, Răzvan Petrescu, etc.), but also on authors whose works have been partially translated (Gheorghe Crăciun, Stelian Tănase, Gabriela Adameşteanu, Florina Iliş etc.)

Since its launching, the *Observer Translation Project* has gathered a number of 20 authors, mostly contemporary Romanian writers (like in the case of the RCI), with a few notable examples of classical authors (Mateiu Caragiale or Petre Ispirescu), and 46 translators into the seven languages. Most translations posted on the website are in English, which adds up to and is somehow justified by the editors' note on the About Us webpage: *Please note, English is the "lingua franca" of the non-literary parts of the site* [4].

In order to further illustrate the dynamics of the international translation flows between Romanian and English, we have continued our investigation in the online catalogues of the university libraries selected for Great Britain, United States of America, and Canada. For the post-communist period, our research revealed the following results:

[2] A complete list of the authors translated within the RCI programmes is available at http://www.cennac.ro/statistici/autori?ordn=numar

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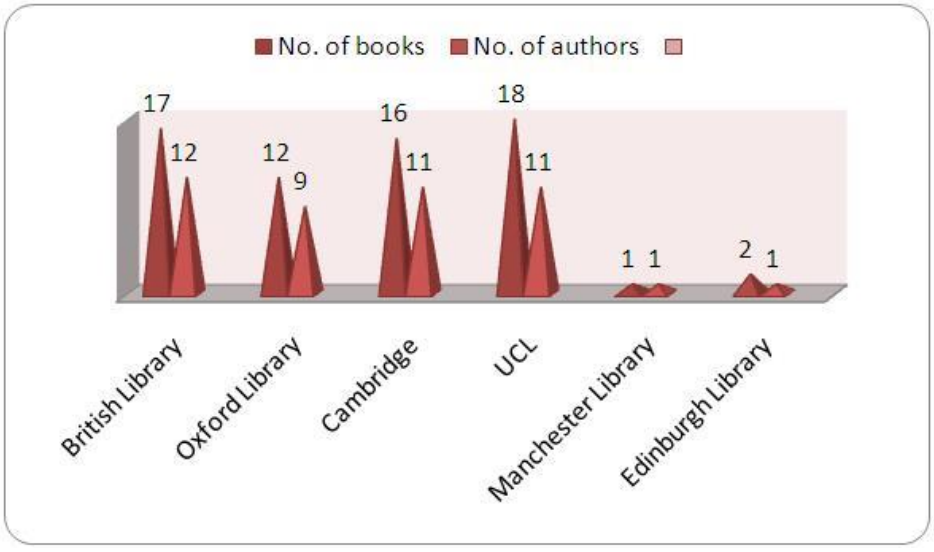

Fig. 1 British Libraries

As it can be seen in Fig. 1, as far as the British libraries are concerned, the highest number of titles was recorded for UCL, with 18 titles translated, belonging to 11 authors, followed by the British Library (17 titles and 12 authors), Cambridge University library (16 titles and 11 authors), and Oxford University library (12 titles and 9 authors); only one author was found in the Edinburgh University library (Mircea Eliade, with two translated titles, *Journal I* and *Journal IV*), and for the Manchester University library (Mihai Eminescu, with one translated work, *Poems and Prose of Mihai Eminescu*).

As it can be noticed in the graph below, the American libraries investigated revealed a higher number of translations. Therefore, we have recorded 35 titles and 18 authors for the Library of Congress; 33 titles and 21 authors for the Stanford university library; 28 titles and 17 authors for Yale university library; 25 titles and 14 authors for Harvard, and, finally, 20 titles and 14 authors for Princeton University library.

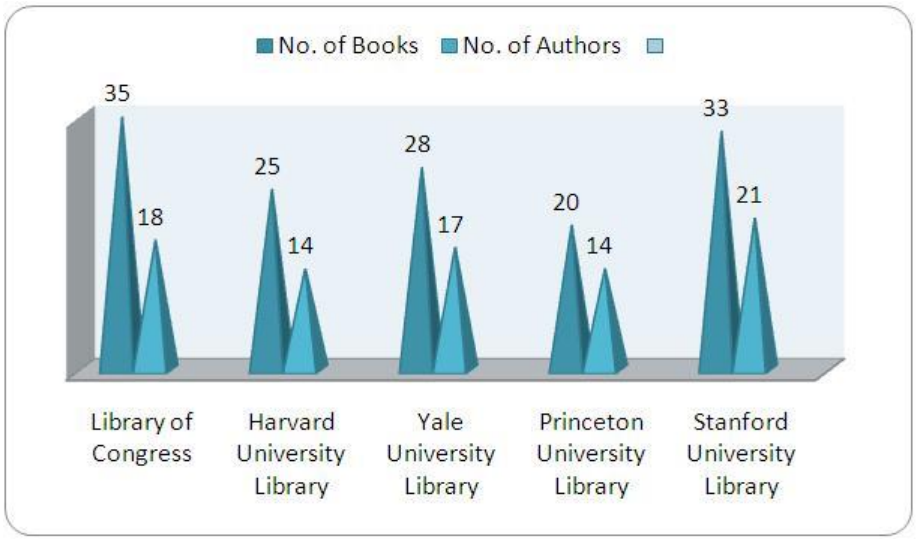

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Fig. 2 American Libraries

As far as the Canadian university libraries are concerned, it is visible from the following graph that the number of books identified is lower compared to those recorded for the British and American libraries investigated. Thus, for UBC we identified 18 titles of Romanian prose translated into English and 13 authors; 15 titles and 11 authors were recorded for the Toronto university library; the library of Quebec returned a number of 9 titles and 6 authors, while for the library of Ottawa we found 4 titles and 4 authors. No title was recorded for the library of Montréal.

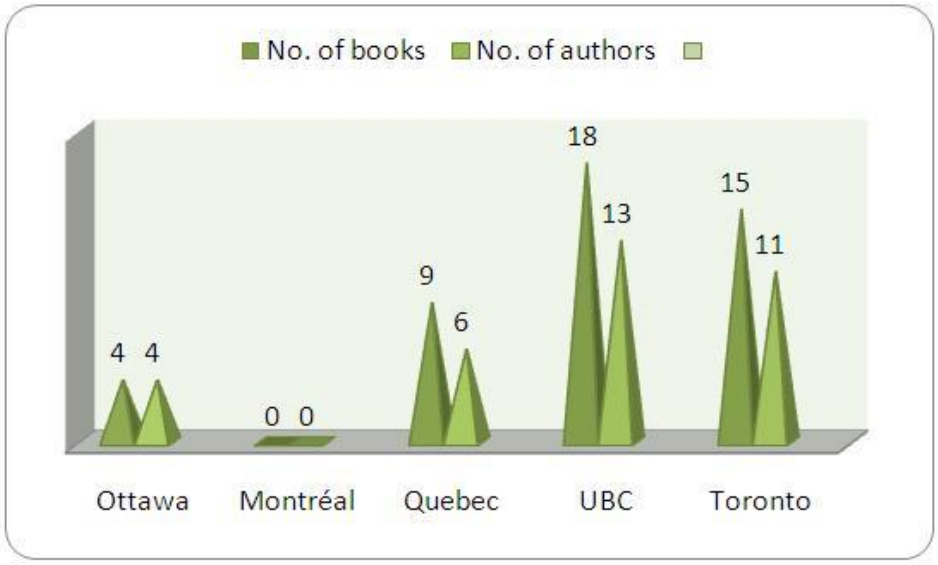

Fig. 3 Canadian Libraries

Considering the reduced number of prose works and authors found in the online catalogues of the libraries investigated, we were not able to identify any kind of regularity regarding the preference for classical or contemporary authors, as a consequence of a coherent translation and promotion policy. Generally, the national libraries hold the highest number of works (as usually any book that enters a country should necessarily be listed in the national libraries' catalogues). However, as our research has shown, the lists of the national libraries investigated are far from being exhaustive.

Correlating these results with the statistics provided by the Romanian Cultural Institute and the Observer Translation Project, as well as the Index Translationum database, we have obtained the following results:

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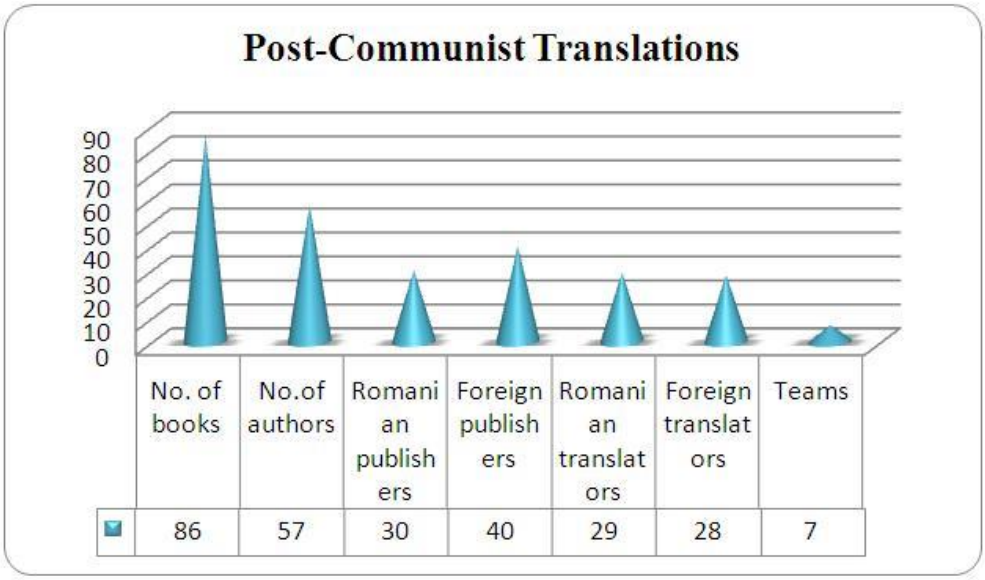

Fig. 4 Translations from the Romanian in the post-communist period

Our research revealed a number of 57 Romanian prose writers, authors of 86 books (of which four are collective works or anthologies: *The Golden Bough – Twilight Stories* (1999), *roMANIA after 2000, Five New Romanian Plays* (2007), *Absinthe: New European Writting 13 - Spotlight on Romania* (2010) and *Romanian stories* (2006).

Of the titles identified, 40 were published by foreign publishing houses, and 30 by Romanian publishers. Moreover, our research revealed a rather balanced ratio of translators: 29 Romanian translators, 28 foreign translators and 7 teams made up of one Romanian and one foreign translator. The authors translated range from classical authors, such as Ion Luca Caragiale, Ion Creangă, Mihail Sadoveanu, Ioan Slavici, Marin Preda, Liviu Rebreanu, Zaharia Stancu, etc., to successful contemporary ones, such as Mircea Cărtărescu, Filip Florian, Stefan Agopian, Horia Roman Patapievici, Stelian Tănase, etc.

Despite the fact that the number of titles identified is extremely reduced, the recent initiatives carried out at institutionalised level in Romania point to the emergence of a timid, yet coherent translation and promotion strategy, still highly dependent on the costs involved. Thus, while focusing predominantly on the promotion of contemporary authors – both in response to market demands, and in order to cater for a wider audience – Romania is trying not to "lose track of its cultural identity" (Snell-Hornby, 1997: 30) and play the asymmetry to its advantage.

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