"A KINGDOM FOR A CIGARETTE"

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Abstract: This paper visits some of the thoughts Antoaneta Ralian shared with her public throughout her long and amazingly prolific translating career. Antoaneta Ralian toiled with the minute religiousness of a hesychast that listens to the chant of the wasteland to unravel the mystery locked in each and every one of the 125 novels and plays she translated. She believed that the translator has to gain access to what lies hidden in the text, subtly interposing the decoding wish in between thought and translation. The translator sets the text free as long as it preserves its intrinsic wealth and beauty. The text is no longer a 'closed' narrative (Umberto Eco), as long as the translator deciphers its inner mechanisms 'forcing' it to reveal itself, opening it towards unlimited semiosis. Quoting various fragments from the last volume of memoirs she published in 2016, Nu cred în sfârşitul lumii [I do not believe in the end of the world], I take a bow of honour to one of the most beautiful minds of the Romanian culture.

Keywords: literature, translation, reading, memoirs

> *"Le temps des œuvres n'est pas le temps défini de l'écriture, mais le temps indéfini de la lecture et de la mémoire. Le sens des livres est devant eux et non derrière, il est en nous: un livre n'est pas un sens tout fait, une révélation que nous avons à subir, c'est une réserve de formes qui attendent leur sens, c'est 'l'imminence d'une révélation qui ne se produit pas' (Borges), et que chacun doit produire pour lui-même."*
>
> *Gérard Genette, L'utopie littéraire*

I have never met Antoaneta Ralian. I saw some pictures of hers, watched the only interview she gave to Eugenia Voda, as one of the most outstanding and elitist Romanian "Professionals", I read the 'trilogy' of her memoirs - *Toamna decanei: convorbiri cu Antoaneta Ralian* [*Dean's Autumn: talks with Antoaneta Ralian*], a volume co-ordinated by Radu Paraschivescu and published in 2011, by Humanitas Press, *Amintirile unei nonagenare: Călătoriile mele, scriitorii mei* [*Memoirs of a Woman in Her Nineties: My Travels, My Writers*], launched in 2014, and *Nu cred în sfârşitul lumii* [*I do not believe in the end of the world*], co-ordinated by Marius Chivu and published in 2016 by ART Press, and, needless to say, I have marvelled at the exquisiteness of her translations. It was only years later that I discovered that she was the 'magician' behind the translation of one of the books that has bewitched millions of children and that was so dear to me, *The Adventures of Pinocchio* by Carlo Collodi. It would have been a privilege to hear her lecture about her work, share details about the places she had visited and people she had met. As I am currently writing this paper, it is only her books and translations that can talk about her, and there are quite a few volumes waiting to be

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'interviewed'! In its humble attempt, this paper is a tribute to the one of the most accomplished translators of all time, whom we are proud to have in the Golden Pantheon of the Romanian culture.

The title of our article comes from one of Antoaneta Ralian' defying challenges launched in the last volume of the 'trilogy', actually a collection of memories, articles and interviews, *Nu cred în sfârşitul lumii* [*I do not believe in the end of the world*]. Seemingly desperate as Richard III's cry "A horse, a horse, my kingdom for a horse!" (Richard III: Act 5, Scene 4), Antoaneta Ralian launches a consuming, almost visceral wish for the pungent smell of tobacco at times when what used to be a life-long, established voluptuousness dimmed its recklessness into a corny medical interdiction (alas, unnegotiable and absolute). Like many other creators, she seemed to depend on the swirling whitish grey spirals of cigarette smoke whenever she was translating any of her 125 American and English novels and plays, just like Mark Twain, Sigmund Freud of her beloved author Thomas Mann did.

While working, I was smoking, understandably, for inspiration and strength, when resting – nothing more relaxing than a cigarette; when angry and upset – the only tranquilizer, the cigarette; when merry, I would spoil myself with a cigarette; professional successes were celebrated with a cigarette; failures, alleviated with a cigarette. (Ralian 2016: 50) [1]

Born into a petty bourgeois Jewish family, Antoinette (Antoaneta) Stein, married Ralian, would spend her childhood in an almost symbiotic relation with her parents, who brought her into the world – as she humorously liked to say – to fill the void left by the death of a son who had died of scarlet fever. Her mother, to whom she was organically attached, a woman of great mind and refined education, introduced young Antoaneta to the blisses of music and reading, unveiling her the great books of the world, one of the first of which was Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*.

All my childhood readings were chosen and guided by my mother. I cannot say which book impacted me the most. All of them have shaped me, /…/ opened the door to life for me, and have taught me to accept or decline (93).

Mother would read (and explain to my own understanding) Thomas Mann, André Gide, Oscar Wilde, and I would read, in French, the books from the Bibliothèque Rose – *Les Malheurs de Sophie*, other moralist books by the Countess of Ségur or by Selma Lagerlöf (names from the stone age for today's computerized children (156).

If playing the piano proved to be an ordeal for the inexperienced disciple, literature, reading gave the meaning to her life, as if completing the DNA chain with another, invisible, yet organically structured extension. "The book and I have always been sworn brothers. I wonder what my life would have been if God had not invented the book" (89). The encounter of the two can only be described as an epiphanic moment that marked not only the destiny of the reader, translator, publisher to be Antoaneta Ralian, but, miraculously, the lives of all those who had their own doors to the world opened by this amazing woman, the *Dame* of the translated English language and literature into Romanian, who did her work like no one else, with grace and gift and breathtaking talent. She was one of those beautiful minds who translated for us novels and plays authored by Daniel Defoe, Charles Dickens, Thomas Hardy, John Galsworthy, Lewis Carroll, George Bernard Shaw, Oscar Wilde, Henry James, Nathaniel Hawthorne, DH Lawrence, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Katherine Mansfield, Lawrence Durrell, Tennessee Williams, Henry Miller, J.D. Salinger, Aldous Huxley, Saul Bellow and Iris Murdoch, E.L.

[1] All quotations from Ralian's *Nu cred în sfârşitul lumii* are my translation.

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Doctorow, Salman Rushdie, Truman Capote, Amos Oz, etc. "/…/ in order to become a good translator, one needs *grace*" (202).

What better example but the translation of the Romanian word '*har*' into English to illustrate the Benedictine-like scrupulousness and artistry of the translator, ruling supreme at the heart of a crossroads of infinite relations. I wonder how Antoaneta Ralian would have phrased this thought of hers into English. Would she have chosen 'grace', as I suggested, or would she have preferred the lexeme 'gift'? The answer must lie at the crossroads of those infinite relations, thoughts and words describe. Her career in translating started timidly when she moved into publishing and dared herself to try her hand at working on a small anthology of Italian short stories. "Neapolitan stories, sentimental ones, bearing *O sole mio*-echoing resonances. And it worked out, I started off on the right foot" (58.) Nevertheless, the first buds of her special talent blossomed when, merely a first-year student, when reading Chaucer's lines she ended up translating them for her not so knowledgeable and gifted roommate, who unhesitantly, admired and complimented her on her most special artistry. Skilfulness, patience, toil, minuteness that describe an 'organic' relationship between text and author is what Antoaneta Ralian's translations are heavily imbued with, and this paper visits some of the thoughts she shared with her public throughout her long and amazingly prolific career. In one of the interviews granted in 2002, when asked if she had ever considered lecturing on the theory of translations, Antoaneta Ralian replied that she simply did not believe in the existence of the concept, totally rejecting the idea of theoretising the artistic act.

When I happen to talk about my translations, I stay away as much as I can from the dissection, anatomization of the act of translation, I avoid quoting from Steiner, as I avoid everything which means theorisation (184).

This is the main reason for which we are not going to embark upon this trail of abstract theorisation that seemed to be so outlandish to this great artist, for she is an *Artist*, just as much a perfectionist and gifted spirit as all the colossal writers whose thoughts and sentiments she translated. "Often enough I see myself as a kind of alter-ego of the writer" (207). Antoaneta Ralian was far more than a translator with grace, she was a vibrant creative sensitiveness who lived all her life in what we might refer to as a sort of an 'arachnean' relationship with the *Giants*; she would constantly spin her delicate, ethereal thread around the intricate narrative webbing, whose matrix she honoured with the same elegance and grace. Her 'touch' was not invasive, disruptive, but enriching and beguiling.

Original literature means procreation, translation means recreation, it means that you create a duplicate that looks unique. This is the goal of a good translation: when you read, you must not have the feeling that it is all about something transplanted into another language. Both the spirit and the letter of the original have to be thoroughly respected (183).

No such thing is possible if the translator does not immerse itself into the enfolding fluids of a special journey that would take him to the very heart of the text. Once there, the intimate process of unfolding the puzzling "mystery in letters" (Mallarmé) tells a story which the whitish tone of the paper awaits to host and (re)create. According to Paul Valery the work gains in importance not so much because of the author as a person, but because of the language he creates. Antoaneta Ralian seems to agree with every line of the 125 works she translated (the last one remained unfinished), for which she prepared with the minute religiousness of a hesychast that listens to the chant of the wasteland. "I cannot translate a writer until I haven't espoused him. I do it through a very careful reading, trying to think with his own thoughts, to

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feel with his own sensitiveness. /…/ it is compulsory that you understand the one you are translating. Not only do you have to penetrate the text, but also the subtext" (206).

"A translation is a mystery you have to unravel" (207), voicing thus the idea that the translator has to gain access to what lies hidden in the text, subtly interposing the decoding wish in between thought and translation. She confesses having adored translating Salman Rushdie, who put her crossword-puzzle deciphering mind to work, for she enjoyed "texts that raise problems, and not the vapid and easy ones. I have a crossword-puzzle solver mentality, I like solving linguistic problems. It gives me a great satisfaction" (76).

The translator sets the text free as long as it preserves its intrinsic wealth and beauty. The text is no longer a 'closed' narrative (Eco), as long as the translator has toiled with its inner mechanisms 'forcing' it to reveal itself, opening it towards unlimited semiosis. In his text *Der Spruch des Anaximander*, published in 1946, Heidegger muses on the following fragment attributed to the Pre-Socratic thinker Anaximander of Miletos (ca 610 BC-547 BC): *Ex hon de he genesis esti tois ousi kai ten phthoran eis tauta ginesthai kata to chreon. Didonai gar auta diken kai tisin allelois tes adikias kata ten tou chronou taxin*, where he sees *genesis* as one intimate dimension of the exploratory essence described by the verb *to (dis)cover*, the equivalent of stepping out into being, after having denied and abandoned the state of concealment. Once into the light, the whole construct *unveils* itself onto the *veiled*, namely the *phtora*. It is through what Heidegger calls *das Lichte* that he refers to the agglutinant concept where *genesis* and *phtora* become co-originary. If the reflection of a creator's thoughts can be regarded as what has been left unthought-of and unuttered in the Universe, then Heidegger says that what we have access to is only a superficial, first look, *das Hinsehen* (Gadamer 1999: 22) that can only make us dream about the final, utmost, complete revelation; meanwhile, there are different interpretations of the same core, be it *chreon* (Anaximander), or *logos* (Heraclit).

Once the logos has (re)composed the order of the universe, the language becomes the territory that unveils the veiled, while translation maps its terrain revealing what is hidden. There is a double relation that operates at this level, one dealing with the texture of the text, the other one with the texture of the creative sensitivity of the translator, and it is not seldom the case when the translator 'freed' the text and the latter performed the exact sort of magic for its interpreter. It is a sort of 'self-transcendence' in which the text (dis)places the translator from its 'self-restrainment' towards a more liberal relation with its substance and essence. Henry Miller and his texts 'freed' the bashful, puritan Mrs. Ralian from all her demons and anguishes, and this is how she describes the almost 'cathartic' part translating played for her "I am actually grateful to Henry Miller for delivering me from my own hypocrisies and taboos" (192).

All those who believed that the 'fiercest' battle, as a translator, she had to fight with the language of Miller's novels could not have been further from the truth, for the 'siege' of her own 'self' took much of her energies: "In fact I haven't had problems with the language, the most terrible thing was to conquer my own taboos, reluctances and unconscious hypocrisies, of which I have become aware much later, just how hypocrite was all the puritanism in which I was brought up (191)". She believed that Henry Miller was that kind of writer who cannot be translated using the classical Renaissance drapery of the 'vine leaves':

At first I was petrified. I had to overcome my own taboos, my own blockings. I had to overcome myself. There are words in Henry Miller which had never crossed my lips and which I could not even pronounce. I can write them, but not utter them. /…/ Henry Miller managed to disembarrass even myself. I acquired a sort of voluptuousness of saying things directly and, while translating him, I dropped part of the petty-bourgeois veils in which I was wrapped (206).

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Translating Miller proved to be, as she herself acknowledges, the milestone of her entire career, and it was the common 'texture' of grace, gift and talent that added that special *touch* to his deciphering into Romanian, another *gift* Antoaneta Ralian and her genius left behind.

A translator of Miller has to be, in the first place, a good translator. He has to understand Miller, to adapt to his proteic personality, his lability, his contradictory character, downright oxymoronic. He has to sense the jester and the tragedian in this author, to adapt to the astounding bounces of his texts, going from the sublime to the scatological, from the seraphic to the sordid. Translating Henry Miller is a spiralled, zigzagged, hurdle-race that requires an extremely experienced runner (174).

Although she believed that it was compulsory for a translator to 'penetrate' the text, the personal relationship between the two creators, author-translator, was not necessarily a *must*. Reading her interviews and articles is as if you are contemplating still waters, but it is common knowledge that still waters run deep; besides, the further one gets from the point where the stone breaks the surface, the more ripples one sees. Still, her inmost wish was to become the 'alter-ego' of the author with whom she would strive to identify herself, aware as she was of the fact that a complete immersion was utterly impossible.

I force myself to see through his eyes, think with his thoughts, feel with his feelings, transpose myself into that author. Sometimes it is easier, whenever there are affinities between myself and that author, but sometimes – as in the case of Henry Miller – there is a total incompatibility, although I still try to understand him, to capture his mechanisms of thought and feeling (195).

So unique and special is this relationship that it also involves the fictional characters that populate the universe stretching in between creator-(re)creator; not only is she deeply, wholeheartedly committed to them, but also to her dream of becoming the alter-ego of the artist. "I confess, shamelessly, that I am emotionally, affectively involved with the characters of the books I translate. Actually, my feelings go towards the authors, who, even if they project themselves onto the characters, are more physical, more palpable, more 'flesh and blood' than their ectoplasmic heroes. With the authors I carry on mute dialogues. When it happens – frequently- that I find them disagreeing with one another, from one page to the other, I admonish them: 'How can you be so stupid?' When they test my translating abilities, I declare them ecstatically: 'How clever you are!" (25)

Her life was blessed with the real friendship of three great writers, one of which was a Nobel Laureate, Saul Bellow. For those who read her memoirs in times of peace and democracy, the thorough understanding of such an accomplishment seems almost impossible. Those were the decades when politics would build walls and not bridges, when the map of the world was torn apart by an absurd doctrinaire chromatic, strikingly red, which annihilated hopes and crippled destinies. Writing a letter, the most used means of communication back then, proved to be not only an exercise of putting together thoughts and feelings, but an allegorical (re)dimensioning of a Chinese chest, full of secret drawers, accessible only to those who knew how to look at it and interpret it. The story of her life also narrates about a beautiful friendship with Iris Murdoch, which spanned for almost 25 years, until she died of Alzheimer, in 1999.

Iris had become a sort of confessor for me. I used to tell her everything, expecting a word of encouragement, of support as I was sure that she would understand, for it was impossible for a writer of her stature not to understand your problems most profoundly, down to the very last fibre (179).

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I made friends with three of the authors I translated. Iris Murdock, whom I met in London, through the British Council, after I had translated *A Word Child*, the first of the five books of hers I translated. What followed was a friendship through correspondence that spanned over 25 years, marked by my visits to London and a visit of hers here. I met Saul Bellow in 1977, when he came to Bucharest accompanying his former wife, Alexandra Baltasar. I was just translating *Humboldt's Gift*. What followed was a friendship through correspondence abruptly brought to an end when *Dean's Winter* came out in America and Bellow was forbidden in Romania. The correspondence resumed occasionally after 1989 when I translated *Dean's Winter* and, afterwards, *Ravelstein*. I translated three books of the postmodern Raymond Federman, whom I had met in the USA, and who was invited to the launch of one of them and afterwards he even attended the Neptun festival. We are currently bonding (19).

Had she had the chance to meet Virginia Woolf, or Katherine Mansfield, she would have certainly declared her admiration and soon afterwards they would have exchanged letters, as she did with her darling Iris. Antoaneta Ralian confesses being infatuated with Virginia Woolf (*honi soit qui mal y pense* (sic!) as she most elegantly, though firmly, warns her readers, quoting the famous motto of the Order of the Garter [*shame on him who thinks evil of it*]), with whom she felt most at home, sharing with her the unique and warm sense of what she refers to as *Heimisch* (68).

I have fallen in love with the minutiae, the psychologic goldsmithery of Virginia Woolf, who made me love her, and also be a little afraid of her, for reading me all the way through. […]
I have also fallen in love with the delicate, lavender-scented laces of Katherine Mansfield's heroines, the sensual cerebralism or the cerebral sensuality of Iris Murdoch […] (26).

It is this love with which she honoured the authors she translated that imbues all her work, which would have failed to reach perfection, had it not been for the abundance of it. Creation means love, self-abandonment and total commitment to a higher instance that transcends the corporeity of the moment and vibrates in the echoes of the music of the spheres. The world dawned in utterance, afterwards silence came and took its place, as *Dean's Autumn* turned into *Winter*. Once again, for the last time, the alter-ego, the books and the shadows have tuned up their strings …"Silence is woven from myriads of infinitesimal sounds, melted together, nevertheless, extant: the murmur of the waters, the wail of the sea, the rustle of the leaves, the sigh of the Earth, the buzz of the insects, the breath of the sky, the ballet of the grass, the laughter of the birds, the quiver of the clouds…" (146). This and infinitely more is what pulses in any of the works Antoaneta Ralian entrusted us with. It is not only words, but also feelings, and thoughts, and *hours*, those *Hours* that are called to narrate a story which author and translator are eager to share.

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