EXPLORING MINORITY: THE CASE OF ROMANIAN LITERATURE IN TRANSITION

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Abstract:Starting from the position put forward by Albert Branchadell (2005), who relies on the term "less translated languages" to speak about languages that are less often used as a source language in translation, being implicitly less present on the international market, this paper aims to explore the situation of Romanian literary translations into English, as well as the presence of these translations in the Anglo-Saxon cultural space. Our investigations will also draw on issues of minority and cultural asymmetry (Cronin, 1995), but also on aspects related to globalization and cross-border mobility, in order to account for Romania's endeavour to shift from periphery to the centre, and play the asymmetry to its own advantage (Zauberga, 2000) using translation as a cultural gateway.

Keywords: Minority, cultural asymmetry, globalization, mobility, cultural gateway.

The aim of the present paper is to investigate the issue of minority, with a focus on the Romanian literature translated into English. Minority, as far as Romanian literature in translation is concerned, is visible from the very dynamics of the cultural exchanges between the source and the target cultures. A case in point is the fact that most of the studies dedicated to the cultural exchanges between Romania and the Anglo-Saxon cultural space approach translation in terms of import (translations into Romanian), barely touching (if ever) the other direction. A few notable examples include Tamara Lăcătuşu's *Cultură şi comunicare. Raporturi literare româno-britanice, 1900 – 1950*, which dedicates a chapter to both directions of reception (although her work only discusses the first half of the 20th century), or Ioana Popa's *Traduire sous contraintes. Littérature et communisme (1947-1989)*, which approaches the translation and promotion of Romanian literature in France, focusing only on the communist years.

Starting from these very general considerations regarding the position occupied by Romania and the Romanian literature within the international cultural milieu, aspects of minority, closely connected to cultural asymmetry, globalisation, as well as mobility or the concept of cultural gateway will be considered in order to provide a more accurate picture of the Romanian literature translated in the English speaking space.

As argued by Michael Cronin, 'minority' should be considered as "a dynamic, as opposed to a static concept" (1998: 145), which would allow minority languages to explore and display their full potential; in other words, "the experiences of minority languages have much to reveal to other languages in a world increasingly dominated by one global language" (Cronin, Ibid.). Therefore, arguing that 'minority' is a dynamic concept, the "expression of a *relation*, not

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of an *essence*", Cronin (2009: 170) posits that it refers to the displacement that a language undergoes from the public sphere, which further leads to marginalisation by a more powerful cultural and linguistic group. The dynamic character of the minority status referred to by Cronin points precisely to the fact that "all languages are potentially minority languages" Cronin (2009: 171), a position which does not necessarily correspond to the number of speakers.

Discussing about the same issues of minority and translation, Albert Branchadell makes use of the term 'less translated languages', an expression that "applies to all those languages that are less often the source of translation in the international exchange of linguistic goods, regardless of the number of people using these languages" (2004: 1). According to the terminology put forward by Michael Cronin, what Branchadell refers to as belonging to the 'less translated languages' category, would correspond to the opposite of 'source-language intensive' (1995: 86-87), without necessarily being 'target language intensive'. In Michael Cronin's terms, 'source-language intensive' translations are translations carried out largely from source languages that enjoy majority status.

Albert Branchadell goes on to discuss the concept of 'minority languages' as a 'fuzzy term', which, although difficult to define, can be categorised as 'languages that are (a) traditionally used within a given territory of a State by nationals of that State who form a group numerically smaller than the rest of the State's population; and (b) different from the official language(s) of that State" (2004: 2). While this definition is rather politicised, as it caters to the aims and goals of the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages, in the context of translation, the term is even 'fuzzier'.

A case in point is the definition provided by Lawrence Venuti (1998) in the special number of *The Translator*, dedicated to the topic of "Translation and Minority" (Volume 4, no. 2). According to Venuti, minority is used "to mean a cultural or political position that is subordinate [. . .]. This position is occupied by languages and literatures that lack prestige or authority, the non-standard and the non-canonical, what is not spoken or read much by a hegemonic culture. Yet minorities also include the nations and social groups that are affiliated with these languages and literatures, the politically weak or underrepresented, the colonized and the disenfranchised, the exploited and the stigmatized." (1998: 135-144)

As revealed by the definition provided by Venuti, translation and minority should necessarily be discussed in the context of the cultural asymmetries and the unequal power relations occasioned or emphasised by the phenomenon of globalisation. Indeed, both the European integration process and globalisation have led to a strengthening of the position English at world level, not only as the language of "globalization", but also as the main language of the European Union. Thus, in the second half of the 20th century, for most developed countries, this new state of affairs brought about – besides migration and cross-border mobility – an increase in the number of books translated, especially from English. Furthermore, small countries and peripheral language groups started to experience a rather one-way route international communication, a situation that is also shared by Romania, perceived as a minor country occupying a peripheral position within the literary polysystem.

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According to Douglas Robinson (1997), who discusses the long history of hegemonic relations between cultures and the cultural asymmetries which do not necessarily involve political dominance, these inequalities will, sooner or later, lead to disproportionate translation ratios. The same position was also taken by Lawrence Venuti (1992, 1995), who provides the clear example of the disproportionate volume of translation from English, which has grown considerably especially after World War II, to the detriment of the translations into English.

The issue of major (dominant or core) versus minor (less dominant or peripheral) language groups has been extensively explored by Johan Heilbron (2008), a scholar interested in explaining "the uneven flow of translations between language groups, as well as the varying role of translations within language groups" (2008: 188). According to the model proposed by Heilbron, the world system of translations is a four level system, in which English occupies the dominant (hypercentral) position (with 50-60% translation share), German and French follow occupying a central position (each owning a share of approximately 10% of the world translation market). The third level is assigned to a number of 7 – 8 semi-central languages (e.g. Spanish, Italian or Russian), with a percentage of 1 to 3%; finally, the last level comprises all languages which count less than 1% of the translations market, and which are thus considered 'peripheral' within the 'translation global economy', irrespective of the number of speakers (Chinese, Japanese, Arabic).

Romania is unfortunately included in this last level of the translations world system, occupying a peripheral position both with respect to its location in Eastern Europe, and as a country from the former Communist bloc). This double position of marginality, of minority has led to a sense of inferiority which is emphasised by the Romanian themselves, who often tend to depict their own country in far darker shades than the real picture.

However, this position of marginality is not always an accurate illustration of the foreigners' perception. For instance, American writer and translator Jean Harris talks about the Romanians' tendency "both to make [themselves] known and to say to whom [they] belong (down to grandparents and even before that), and this predilection combines with a tendency to recollect, out loud, *a lot*" (2008: [1]), emphasizing the tale telling talent of the inhabitants of the world capital of stories (Romania): "you can learn all about somebody in the first five minutes, and routine disclosures are also expected of you. Tale telling is a prominent feature of social life, and this is true in the domain of Senator, cab driver and peasant" (Ibid.).

Furthermore, Jennifer Schuessler (2008: [2]) mentions the "thriving literary scene" of this "Romance-language-speaking country of 22 million, recently famous for global cinematic sensations like *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* and *12:08 East of Bucharest*". She goes on to quote A.O. Scott, NY Times film critic, arguing that "Romania is one of those countries where it seems that every literate person has written a novel, a book of essays, or at least a play" (Ibid.).

In terms of translations from the Romanian into English, a study we conducted on the translation of Romanian prose into English, revealed a rather limited number of books translated over three important periods in the history of Romania. Thus, analysing translation over the pre-communist, communist and post-communist periods, we identified 17 books translated in the

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pre-communist period, 75 books translated in the communist period and 86 books translated in the post-communist period (more precisely between 1989 and 2012).

As regards the number of translations, it can be argued that the translation of Romanian literature has constantly followed an ascending line. Although the difference in the number of translations recorded for the communist and post-communist years is not significant, we should however point to the fact that those 75 works were translated over a period of 43 years, while the 86 translations recorded for the contemporary period were made during no more than 22 years. Moreover, between 2005 and 2012 alone, 23 prose works[1] were translated into English through the programs developed by the Romanian Cultural Institute.

In terms of Romania's attempt to shift from margin to the centre, it should be pointed out that the pre-communist years were marked by a constant effort from the Royal House of Romania (and more precisely, by the efforts made by Queen Marie) to promote the Romanian literature in the Anglophone milieu, or, more precisely, to put Romania on the map (as a recently formed independent state that was barely known to the world). The communist years, with the change of regime towards Ceauşescu's dictatorship, also brought in a shift in status. By their foreign policy, the authorities promoted the image of a strong state, massively "exporting" abroad its cultural values, relying on translation as a cultural gateway. And finally, contemporary constitutional and democratic Romania is struggling to promote its cultural values. The issues are still image-related: the traces of the communist dictatorship, the miners' strikes, the stories of vampires, the orphans, the gypsies and the stray dogs, are all part of a stereotypical image of Romania that still needs to be corrected.

Finally, the evolution of the translation and publishing practices and the reduced number of translated works can also be assessed in terms of position within the world system. Occupying a marginal position as a newly established state during the interwar period, with a brief positive change of image in the communist years and a shift towards the centre of the system (within the communist bloc), followed by its current marginal position both as a minority language in Europe and as an East-European country at world level, Romania has yet to learn how to play this asymmetry to its advantage (Zauberga, 2000).

However, the recent success registered by the translation and promotion policies led by the Romanian Cultural Institute in the post-communist period entitles us to hope that in the future the translations from the Romanian literature may well turn into requisition (Dollerup, 1996) from foreign publishing houses.

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