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**Engaging with Translation.
New Readings of
George Steiner's *After Babel***

Marco Agnetta

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Brian O'Keeffe

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Review of: SASS, Maria / BAGHIU, Ștefan / POJOGA, Vlad [eds.] (2018): *The Culture of Translation in Romania / Übersetzungskultur und Literaturübersetzen in Rumänien*. Berlin: Peter Lang. 326 p. ISBN: 978-3-631-76642-2.

This volume is part of a large cultural project entitled *Writers and Translators. Transnational Literary Workshops* that includes a series of events organized around writers in translation and the way they shape cultural environments through their work in Romania. The project and the publication of the volume are organized by the Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu, one of the most dynamic centers of translation studies of the country. The title term „culture of translation”, which was introduced to translation studies by the Graz translation scholar Erich Prunč, and which has subsequently proved to be an innovative and productive concept, summarizes the intention and the main benefit of this volume. The 21 contributions, written in English and German, and which focus on literary translation, offer a well-founded insight into the research interests and current issues that animate and shape the Romanian translational (and translational) field. Various actors—translation scholars, literary critics, philologists, and translators—have their say in this work, each reflecting on the phenomenon of translation from different perspectives, ranging from quantitative studies and close analyses of literary translations (section 1 and 2) to examinations of the translator’s perspective (section 3). The wide range of topics does not allow a review of every single contribution, so we

will concentrate on the important keywords that inform the current academic discussion and which testify to the common interests of the Romanian and international community of translation scholars. At issue, in this regard, is (1) historically oriented translation research and (2) aspects of translator studies focusing especially on the phenomenon of poet-translators.

(1) The historical approach has proven fruitful when tackling delicate issues like national and world literature. This can be seen in the essay of Andrei Terian entitled “Translating the World, Building the Nation: Microtheories of Translation in Romanian Cultural Criticism (1829–1948)”. The study offers a descriptive perspective which addresses how the question of translation was discussed by the Romanian cultural elite. While during the second part of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth century the debate centred on whether translation could constitute a literature, the focus subsequently shifted towards the necessity of establishing criteria for a translative canon in order to avoid the proliferation of popular foreign literature in Romanian translation, considered of low quality from an aesthetic standpoint. A literary critic and historian himself, Terian’s approach to translation history is marked by his research interest in topics like nation building, world literature and (semi)peripheral literary cultures. By summarizing the stances on translation adopted by some of the most important Romanian intellectuals of the late nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, his paper is a valuable source for scholars of translation history who are interested in mapping the circulation of ideas regarding translation in the nineteenth-century Europe. They will not be surprised that a critic and an ideologue like Titu Maiorescu (1840–1917)—one of the most influential Romanian intellectuals of the second half of the nineteenth century—discussed literary translation in terms of rendering a “nation’s spirit” (p. 22). Having studied in Paris and Vienna, he praised the German public for embracing the translation of Romanian literary works, since it has “taken the greatest interest in the literary spirit of other nations” (p. 22).

Written along similar lines, Cosmin Borza's study, "Translating Against Colonization. Romanian Populist's Plea for Peripheral Literatures (1890–1916)", constitutes an excellent example of how literary and translation history can benefit from a joint perspective—it finely illustrates the contribution translation history can make to a better understanding of literary and cultural history. Borza unveils a surprising phenomenon, namely the strong interest of Romanian populists for 'minor' literatures and their endorsement of the translation of Eastern and Northern European literature. All this seems in contrast with the populists' "nationalistic excesses, and their reluctance to embrace contemporary Western literary trends", but it was actually "ideologically and socially motivated by their desire to counterbalance the colonizing influence of the West, and French culture in particular" (p. 38). Borza arrives at this conclusion after presenting a well-documented and particularly strong case. It is to be noted, moreover, that, for a reader unfamiliar with Romanian history and culture, Borza valuably provides the necessary contextualization. This ensures not only a better understanding of the text in general, but also warrants recommending Borza's own text as an essential bibliographic source for further study, all the more so since there are very few papers in English on the history of translation into Romanian during the second half of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth.

With Ștefan Baghiu's and Vlad Pojoga's papers, historical perspective meets quantitative studies and the research is focused on the product of the translation process, namely novels translated during the communist regime (1944–1989) and poetry translated after its demise (1990–2015) and published in periodicals. Based on the data acquired from *Dicționarul cronologic al romanului tradus în România (1793–1989)* [The Chronological Dictionary of the Novels Translated in Romania], in "Strong Domination and Subtle Dispersion: A Distant Reading of Novel Translation in Communist Romania (1944–1989)", Baghiu identifies four major trends dominating the translation of novels: the domination of the Soviets which led to the first geographical dispersion (1948–1955); East-West equalization which led to the second geographical dispersion

(1955–1964); the dominance of the West in respect to interwar and contemporary Western trends (1964–1975); proportionate equality and sub-production (1975–1989) (p. 63). Besides establishing a periodization of literary translation in communist Romania, Baghiu’s study offers valuable insights for researchers in translation and comparative literature interested in Eastern European prose works or the matter of censorship in translation. As regards this particular topic, we must also take into account the complex nature of the relationship between national literature and translated literature during an authoritarian regime. In Romania’s case, the translation of certain authors and books during the communist regime had a potentially subversive value and exerted an influence on the literary works published during that time. Even more so since some writers were not allowed to publish their own works but were given a pass when it came to translation. Hence translation not only became a means of sustenance, but also a means of literary self-expression. Pojoga’s study, “A Survey of Poetry Translations in Romanian Periodicals (1990–2015)”, a quantitative analysis of the data on translated poetry extracted from five periodicals issued after the demise of the communist regime, indicates a lack of a comprehensive strategy when it comes to poetry translation published in specialized reviews. The author also discusses the difficulties he had to face during research and data acquisition, such as having to discard some valuable publications that are not entered into any online databases. In the light of these inevitable obstacles, quantitative research becomes an instrument, a means to an end, but not the goal itself.

The historical perspective also proves to be a useful tool in Anca-Simina Martin’s enquiry into Romanian renditions of Shakespeare’s stylistic peculiarities in “Foreignizing Shakespeare’s Bawdy Multilingual Puns in Communist and Post-Communist Romania”. By means of contrastive analysis, she identifies the translation strategies employed in two Romanian versions of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and *Life of King Henry the Fifth* made by five translators (Vlăicu Birna, Adriana and George Volceanov, Ion Vinea, Horia Gârbea) during and after the communist regime. The historical over-

view casts a light on how translative activity fell prey, more or less overtly, to ideological struggle and communist propaganda. In the first Romanian edition, Shakespeare's works "were orthographically and ideologically altered to advance the newly dominant doctrine of that period and the desired changes in terms of spelling, while also linguistically appropriating them on several occasions to suit the target culture. This, rather than to offer an immersive experience by granting the Romanian reader the 'privilege of interacting with the culture of progressive countries', as announced in the 1945 translation manifesto, actually directed the target-text audience towards the Soviet linguistic model and doctrine. To this end, the blend between Shakespeare's social universe and their infusion of target-culture elements served as instruments of primary importance" (p. 181). For Martin, the constraints become opportunities (p. 178) that stimulated the translators' creativity, rather than unsurmountable challenges. Following Dirk Delabastita's seminal work, Martin arrives at the conclusion that when it comes to bawdy multilingual puns, the question of translatability should be a matter of adjustment to a specific cultural and social reality rather than an abstract notion.

(2) In recent years there has been an increasing appeal for more "raw material" concerning translators and their activity that could feed into the new sub-discipline called "Translator Studies" and where translators viewed as persons are placed centerstage so that they are perceived as individuals and as actors in the literary field. There has also been an appeal for closer scrutiny and deeper exploration of the work of translators themselves as regards their position with respect to their work. Many essays in this book contribute to the emerging body of research on these topics. George State is the author of a new translation of Paul Celan's complete poetic works into Romanian. In his essay "Circumcelan. A Critical Confession", he distances himself from existing translations such as those provided by Nina Cassian and Petre Solomon (Celan's close friends during his Bucharest years) by considering these to be "perhaps too empathetical at times—and thus, sometimes, too emphatic" (p. 264). At the same time, he distances himself from his

own earlier translations which he now considers from a more mature perspective to be “a regress” (p. 264) in many respects. The driving force behind his decades of engagement with Celan’s work was, as the author confesses, the genuine desire to understand it by means of translation itself; conversely, understanding Celan’s poetry helped him to translate it, as he shows within a translation example from the poem *Die Hochwelt*. For State, this circular movement of comprehension occurred not only in terms of ongoing re-readings of the primary texts, but also in terms of a confrontation with the extensive research on the German poet. At issue, in this respect, are two salient positions: on the one hand, the so-called Gadamerian approach, which deals with the text itself, i. e. detached from its creator; on the other, the Szondi-Bollack approach, which emphasizes historical and biographical data. State firmly adopts the second interpretative paradigm, which fights “in true Celan fashion” (p. 263) against the atemporality of poems. This perspective, which became the basis of his translations of Celan’s poetic work was “the key of its very understanding” (p. 263), satisfied his “brightnesshunger” (p. 265), and allowed him to achieve what he was striving for, namely “some sort of limpidity” (p. 265). Whether this path to understanding is the true one, whether Celan’s poetry needs to be “protected from any change of meaning”, as State (perhaps too emphatically?) claimed in an earlier magazine interview, remains an open issue, however. In any case, State’s translation offers a distinctively hermeneutic reading and rendering of Celan in the Romanian language, and—undoubtedly—marks a new and significant stage in the intense reception (e.g. via translation) of Celan’s poetic work in Romanian culture (cf. Bican 2005).

Translation as understanding is the main topic also in the article “Ezra Pound: A Few Notes after a Translation”. Radu Vancu is a poet, literary scholar, and a distinguished translator of Pound among many other poets. In respect of Pound in particular, Vancu has extensively translated Pound’s poetry and essays into Romanian. Vancu presents the theoretical substructure of Pound’s poetry as it appears *a posteriori* to him, namely the unique connection be-

tween Pound's concept of "beauty", the motto "making new" and his understanding of the "technique" that ultimately constitutes the poet's individuality and indeed his poetic identity. Vancus' reflections lead to his own definition of the good poet and to the claim that a poet's work should have three qualities: an anarchic attitude in his writing, the power to recycle the literary tradition on a staggering scale, and an obsession with the poetic image, its power and vitality. Pound consistently fulfils these requirements and this motivated Vancus' translation of the *Cantos* into Romanian: "because their sophisticated poetry, hybridizing all the major poetic qualities, could be a decisive catalyst for the Romanian poetry of the future" (p. 277). The translation performs a valuable service to the Romanian literary community, especially to the younger generation which can learn from a master such as Pound "the importance to commingling all these three qualities in their own writing" (p. 277).

Not only do translators themselves have a say in this volume, they are also the subject of vivid depiction. In a very thorough study, and in a way that it clearly recalls the intentions of the German "Germersheim Translator Research" which placed the translators' dictionary at its center, Stefan Sienerth reconstructs the „life and work history of the poet and translator Wolf von Aichelburg". The main intention of the essay is to fill in the as yet incomplete image of Aichelburg (1912–1994) as he occupied a position in the Romanian-German literary scene during those years and thus to bring to light previously hidden aspects of his life on the basis of unpublished material from the archives of the Romanian secret service, the *Securitate*. In a very eventful life marked by political persecution and numerous forced stays in labour camps and prisons until his departure from Romania in 1980, this German writer from Romania wrote thousands of pages: his own poems and prose (on which the later Nobel Prize winner Herta Müller wrote her state examination paper) as well as translations from the classics of Romanian literature (Mihai Eminescu, Vasile Voiculescu, George Bacovia, Lucian Blaga etc.) which has secured him a leading position among Romanian-German translators to this day.

Another common ground between Romanian and international translational research can be identified in the high interest currently shown in the phenomenon of the poet-translator. This topic, which has triggered a veritable boom in research over the last decade in Translation Studies, is addressed in this volume by essays that focus on George Coșbuc and Lucian Blaga, two prominent figures of Romanian classical literature who have also undertaken extensive translational work. In her essay “Rezeption, Nachgestaltung und literarische Übersetzung. Der Dichter und Literaturvermittler George Coșbuc”, Maria Sass offers a vivid portrait of that Transylvanian poet and translator, especially in terms of his German affiliations. Coșbuc (1866–1918) was an extremely prolific translator, primarily of the German literature that lay so close to his heart. Sass discusses his method of translation by means of an example from Martin Opitz’ poem *Zlatna* or *Von der Rube des Gemüthes*. Her analysis, which is guided by the principle “the examination of a translation primarily asks to what extent the secondary text differs from the original” (p. 146), concludes that Coșbuc was committed to the principle of equivalence in his translation. He also extensively translated masterpieces of world literature: works of ancient Greek and Latin, for instance, which were translated directly from their original languages, writings from English, Spanish, Chinese and Sanskrit literature, albeit, in these cases, the translations were accomplished without him having mastered the source languages (a typical characteristic of poet-translators) and instead via the intermediary of their German versions. This essay also briefly discusses his most appreciated translation, namely Dante’s *Divina Comedia*. Coșbuc originally did not know Italian, was subsequently dissatisfied with the translation that was produced indirectly via German, and then began to learn the original language, undertook trips to Italy, and also studied Dante’s work for about 20 years in detail in order to be able to translate from the original. Finally, he presented a translation of this masterpiece of world literature in Romanian, and it is now considered a classic.

The poet and philosopher Lucian Blaga (1895–1961) was one of the most prominent translators during the first decade of the

Communist regime in Romania and reflected deeply on the topics of translation and national culture. At the center of his extensive translational work is undoubtedly the translation of Goethe's *Faust*—this is the subject of Ioana Constantin's essay "Goethes *Faust* in der Übertragung Lucian Blagas. Eine Bestandsaufnahme". After a brief historical overview of previous translations, the contribution focuses on the publication of Blaga's 1955 version—"one of the most important and beautiful translations into Romanian language" (p. 161). It had an extremely strong literary impact: 25,000 copies of the translation sold out in 3 days; an eyewitness reports that when Blaga delivered a talk on his translation, he spoke to a room so crowded that chairs were torn from the floor and crushed against the walls. Against the background of Antoine Berman's theory of translation (ethical versus ethnocentric translation), Constantin presents Blaga's translational *credo*, analyses some passages of his translation according to the criteria of Werner Koller's theory of equivalence, and locates Blaga's performance in the context of his own poetry as well as in the history of the translations of this classical work into Romanian. Blaga is undoubtedly an exemplary illustration of the phenomenon of poet-translators who recreate the original text poetically and linguistically. His Romanian *Faust* version is definitely "not a philological translation, but a new creation, an expression of the poetic creativity and poetic personality of Lucian Blaga" (p. 171).

In addition to the main thematic lines we have outlined, the volume offers the interested reader further insights into more specifically Romanian aspects of translation practice and theory, such as the reception of Chinese literature (Iulia Elena Giță), of Futurism (Emanuel Modoc), of Nordic Noir Bestsellers (Ovio Olaru) and the use of sexual language (Cătălina Stanislav) in Romanian translations. There are also portraits (unfortunately not depicted in translational terms) of Radu Paraschivescu and Doina Ioanid, two of the most appreciated Romanian contemporary writers, supplied by Nora Căpățână and Doris Sava, and Sunhild Galter offers an account of Luminița Mihai Cioabă, one of the very few Roma-poetesses, and who became known and popular in Germany and Aus-

tria thanks to the German translation and lobbying of Beatrice Ungar. Finally, there are contextualizing contributions that broaden the regional perspective through the analysis of subversive prose writing in Eastern-Europe countries under Soviet censorship between 1948 and 1990 following Itamar Even-Zohar's definition of literary production in terms of a "system" (Alex Goldiș) and an effort to internationalize the perspective by discussing the unrewarding status of the literary translator (Georg Aesch) and translatorship in the age of digital globalization (Alex Ciorogar).

To summarize: this volume focuses on Romania, a country whose language and literary culture are rather unfamiliar to scholars working in Translation Studies, and it offers a content-rich engagement with the question of its specific translation culture. The contributions show how Romanian translational discourses and practices are intimately connected to currently hot research topics in the discipline (i. e. historically oriented translation research and aspects of translator studies that focus especially on the phenomenon of poet-translators) and how they simultaneously develop their own modes of translatory enquiry. Romania, that "smaller nation, one born of a hyperengagement with translation; one modelled on, developed within, and expressed through translation" (Cotter 2014: 145), represents a dynamic translational (and translological) landscape of its own yet to be fully appreciated and surveyed in Translation Studies.

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