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Source-oriented Agency in Hungarian/Romanian to English Translation: Translator Testimonial

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Abstract
As someone who has embarked on their translation career as an offshoot from academic research and as a translator who works from native languages into a language of habitual use, I privilege source-culture oriented strategies. My aim is to contribute to the enrichment of the global literary canvas by celebrating less translated languages and I am striving to contribute to the diversity of the translation scene. On a practical level, this "supply-driven" agenda goes hand in hand with initiating translation projects, and in this respect, I am aiming to challenge dominant concepts of centre and periphery. Rather than waiting to be asked by publishers, I advocate reaching out to professional organizations and funding bodies in the source culture(s) and empowering the translator to act not only as a supplier of literature from another language but as an active participant in cultural diplomacy. My contribution to this special issue of *The AALITRA Review* reflects on my experience, drawing on collaborations with publishers, authors and funding bodies, and highlighting successful initiatives that have played a role in ensuring the visibility of less translated literatures in the English-speaking world.

Background

In this paper, I shall be reflecting on my experience as a Hungarian and Romanian to English translation professional.[1] My translation practice had gradually emerged from my academic research and teaching conducted over the last two decades in the United Kingdom, motivated by an insider knowledge of the source cultures and a sense of frustration with the limited representation of contemporary Hungarian and Romanian literature in English translation. To put it differently, I reacted to my dissatisfaction with the discrepancy between the indigenous and foreign recognition circuit, and my aim was to contribute to the Anglophone understanding of Hungarian and Romanian literary traditions. Looking back from the vantage point of nearly a decade of freelance translation work, I can point out that I had my ups and downs, including absolute joy and professional recognition, as well as moments of insecurity and self-doubt.

Starting out, I was reasonably aware of the necessary negotiations between what could be accessible for the target culture and what could be considered representative for the source culture, but I underestimated the baggage that being a non-native speaker of English would carry. As a widely published scholar and someone with UK-based doctoral studies in English and Comparative Literary Studies, I was not used to having to justify my right to express myself in English, and the issue of hierarchy between my languages or the order in which I acquired them had never come up in my academic career. English has been the language of my habitual use for more than twenty-five years and is the language in which I communicate day in, day out. As an aspiring translator, however, I suddenly found myself turned away from mentoring

[1] This paper reworks some ideas I presented in a paper delivered at the "Supplying Translation' symposium, hosted online by the University of Nottingham on 27 April 2021.

schemes and translation agencies or was invited to work in the opposite direction: into my native languages, Hungarian and Romanian. This attitude that privileges the translator's mother tongue is of course not entirely unjustified, however, it is deeply restrictive if not discriminative and constitutes a major obstacle to attempts at achieving diversity within the profession.

That being so, I hasten to add that this type of gatekeeping is not characteristic for the entire sector, and the translation scene has become considerably more inclusive in recent years despite the ongoing preference for native speaker translators. Even though I have stumbled upon endless obstacles over the last decade, in the end, I chose to continue translating – because I wanted to contribute to a plurality of voices in translation practice and to carve out a legitimate space for different nuances of English. I also wanted to challenge power relations and to have a say in what and how to translate. In my modest ways, I aspire to contribute to curating and managing translation flows between relatively small literatures on the semi- periphery and the hyper-centre that is English. As it happens, for neither Hungarian or Romanian is English the main target language. Romanian titles are generally picked up in French, Spanish, Italian translations and Hungarian titles in German, Dutch, Polish, and there is also a fair amount of mutual translation between Romanian and Hungarian, especially as far as Hungarian literary voices from Transylvania is concerned. For both Hungarian and Romanian literary outputs, the ultimate aim with English translations is not merely to set foot in the UK or US market but also to open up texts to a wider global access. In most cases, however, English versions are a realistic expectation after already existing foreign circulation, and they tend to get commissioned only in the wake of successful publications in other Western languages. The reasons for this are manifold apart from publishers playing safe, but when it comes to the flow of literary translations from the less widely spoken languages, which in this case equals less translated languages, the sheer terminology in use is illustrative of the status quo.

Terminology

Chitnis, Stougaard-Nielsen and Milutinovic edited a collection entitled *Translating the Literatures of Small European Nations*, arising from a conference with the same name held in September 2015 at the University of Bristol. An affiliated event was organized in March 2016 at Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE) in Budapest under the title *Small is Great. Cultural Transfer Through Translating the Literatures of Smaller European Nations*. Terms such as "translation as imposition" – to describe translation activity "driven by the source culture" (Dollerup 45-56); "source-culture driven" translations (Zauberga 67-78); "literary gifts" from the "source pole" (Leppihalme 789-804), and more recently, "supply-driven translation" (Vimr 46-68; Hellewell) make an explicit point of drawing attention to the forces that fuel this type of endeavour. Furthermore, specialist literature as well as personal accounts tend to use "native language(s)", "mother tongue" and "first language" interchangeably, the latter often situated in opposition with "L2" and "acquired" language(s). The numerical references clearly signal the chronological order of language acquisition, whereas references to "native" or one's female parent prioritize birth right to the detriment of geo-cultural affiliation. These terms, not to mention the negative "non-native", also deny agency to the speaker and fail to acknowledge the possibility of multiple allegiances. In my case, for example, the languages I had been exposed to at birth stopped being the languages of habitual use decades ago. In their wake, a new complex relationship has emerged – this time between a cluster of languages that interlink, without the need of formulating hierarchies. This is not a case of "inversion" as the term "inverted translation" might suggest; it is simply a continuum of languages which I have access to and which are in constant dialogue with one another. That said, I recognize my own practice in these theoretical considerations, even if I wish that the landscape was more nuanced, and I had much wider options to navigate. Needless to say, my own experience detailed below is not

an exhaustive analysis of the overall scene and may not be representative for other translators who have come to the profession at other moments in time, in different ways and from different cultural locations.

Pitching and Championing Projects

Out of the nine published books that I translated to date, I directly pitched five, and I was commissioned to translate four, twice as a follow-up from earlier work. Two titles were funded by the author, and the rest by the respective publishers that include independent and academic presses. Three of my commissions were by publishers based in Romania, which means that I have basically cold-pitched all my UK-based publications. Pitching to publishers is of course common in academia and, in this regard, I have significant prior experience, but it is an endeavour with a very low success rate that demands plenty of effort and commitment. Only a small number of editors and literary publishers are open to pitches from translators, which means that even if a certain title might be a potentially good fit for a given publisher, it may not reach them in the absence of intermediaries. Recently, two pitches of mine were picked up by publishers (*Home* by Andrea Tompa by Istros Books in the United Kingdom and *MyLifeandMyLife* by Melinda Mátyus Ugly Duck Presse in the United States), and Romanian publisher Curtea Veche commissioned me to translate one of their titles into English (*The Magnificent Boar* by Péter Demény, soon forthcoming with US publisher New Meridian Arts).

As the translator of one of the few Hungarian or Romanian titles to be published in English in a given year, I am aware of the responsibilities attached to representing a niche strand within Anglophone translation spaces. Some of my translator colleagues from the Hungarian have recently addressed this at a panel chaired by Timea Sipos at ALTA43 (the first such panel dedicated to translating Hungarian): Paul Olchvary stating that publishers often see the few Hungarian authors as spokespersons for Hungary per se. This is not what these authors generally intend themselves, and I feel that our task is to add to the diversity of literary imports from Romanian and Hungarian, and even though some authors may get slowly established in English, it is important to try to persuade publishers to take risks rather than commission the next book by (the very few) award-winning figures.

Translating Drama and Theatre

As a translator of drama, I find that this responsibility is even more prevalent and we could not even average one translation per year in my language combinations, even though we have the added support of performers and theatre companies, who fuel the interest of publishers in bringing out drama translations. In a UK context, print publications are generally predicated on productions at major theatre venues, in which case Methuen, Oberon (both now part of Bloomsbury Publishing) or Nick Hern Books are likely to publish the playtexts that are then sold independently and marketed as an accompanying programme during the show's run. Sadly, this rarely extends to fringe productions, despite the much greater variety of dramatic work being produced there. This is a major loss to the diversity and accessibility of the theatre scene, but it is somewhat counterbalanced by alternative approaches to making the broader theatre profession aware of new work.

This trend is exemplified by online theatre productions and/or audio dissemination – such as my recent projects with Trap Door Theatre in Chicago and with Trafika Europe Radio Theatre, where my translations of Matéi Visniec's *Cabaret of Words* and *Decomposed Theatre* were adapted for digital and radio theatre, respectively. Trap Door decided to undertake a very significant adaptive edit, retitling their production *Discourse without Grammar* after one of the scenes in the play, while Trafika Europe Radio framed their broadcast with an extended interview with the playwrights and translator conducted by Trafika Europe Radio editor and

influential cultural commentator Andrew Singer. In addition, I have also developed a habit of documenting my stage translations, and in parallel with having plays by the Hungarian András Visky and the Romanian Matéi Visniec (also known as Matei Vişniec) produced by the likes of Foreign Affairs in London and Trap Door and Theatre Y in Chicago, I have written about the translation and staging process for publications such as *The Theatre Times, Hungarian Literature Online*, the *ITI Bulletin* and most recently *Hungarian Cultural Studies.*

Relying on my expertise as a writer and critic, I edited substantial hybrid publications that transcend the boundaries between general readership and academia. In this way, I was able to bypass the rule whereby only productions staged by major theatre venues warrant the publication of plays and managed to persuade Seagull Books to publish the first English language anthology of Matéi Visniec's plays, titled *How to Explain the History of Communism to Mental Patients and Other Plays*. I also prompted *Intellect* to bring out the critical anthology András Visky's *Barrack Dramaturgy: Memories of the Body*. Most recently, I edited and translated the volume *Plays from Romania: Dramaturgies of Subversion,* published by Bloomsbury in October 2021. This volume is the first transnational survey of playwriting featuring dramas by Romanian, Hungarian, German and Roma authors not only in English translation but also in Romanian. This book has received an exceptionally warm welcome, including a possible translation offer and several generous reviews and mentions in English, Hungarian and Romanian.

Supply-driven Translation

As indicated above, all these projects have been "supply-driven", compensating for a perceived lack of demand from the target culture, in the sense that I identified the works to be translated, contacted the original authors and sought out publishers. Having written about most of the authors previously in prestigious academic publications such as the collection *Contemporary European Playwrights*, edited by Maria M Delgado, Bryce Lease and Dan Rebellato, and including introductory essays in my edited anthologies has certainly helped, and so did the fact that I involved fellow translators - thus suggesting broader preoccupation with the work than just my personal interest. In other words, I felt that curating a selection from what promises to be an extensive portfolio would seem preferable to vanity projects from the point of view of publishers. This also underlined the fact that, especially in such niche fields as Hungarian-English and Romanian-English translation, there are communities of translators.

It goes without saying that with limited publishing opportunities, there is a healthy competition (more than once, I found myself pitching titles that others were also promoting), but if anything, there is need for more translator voices to render the extremely diverse array of styles, genres and approaches in these rich literary traditions. Source language publishers have recently started to recognize the importance of reaching out to active translators, and the Hungarian Magvető and the Romanian Polirom in particular have decent English-language websites, alert translators to new publications and regularly commission translation samples from their recent titles. Needless to say, few of these titles get actually published, and contracts may not go to the translator who initially did the sample, partly because the sample scene is dominated by a handful of translators and because persuading publishers is such a laborious task.

Cultural Organizations and Their Roles in Facilitating Translation Projects

Informal public knowledge on which literary works are being translated, and the names of the translators, would be useful. Grant schemes run by the Petőfi Literary Fund in Hungary draw attention to some of the latest ventures on which individual translators are working. Since some of the grants are for emerging translators and no publishing contracts are required, people can

genuinely propose projects they would like to champion. One of the most successful examples is Owen Good's translation of *Pixel* by Krisztina Tóth (2019), which was the beneficiary of such an initial grant and then went on to successful publication and notable commendations from several prestigious translation awards. This is a rare case though. An array of completed samples are still waiting to be picked up by publishers, including my own translation samples from Árpád Kun's *Boldog észak* [*Blissful North*] and Johanna Bodor's *Nem baj, majd megértem* [*Never Mind, I'll Get It Later*] for which I am still on the look-out for a publisher. The Petőfi Literary Fund is also running schemes for publishers interested in bringing out Hungarian titles in translation, and as it is the case in other languages, most translators approach publishers with such information at hand knowing that without subsidies they are unlikely to get anywhere. My prospective translation of Andrea Tompa's fourth novel *Haza* [*Home*] has just received such a grant, albeit at a scale that in itself does not cover the full costs and hence further subsidies are needed. This initial vote of confidence – as well as a published excerpt in World Literature Today – may be helpful in persuading other funding bodies. I can only hope that when allocating future grants, the actual market value of translators' labour will also be taken into account.

The Romanian Cultural Institute is overseeing a similar award-scheme for the publishers of translations from Romanian. The Translation and Publication Support Programme (TPS) at Centrul Național al Cărții (CENNAC) [National Book Centre] has supported around 300 titles since 2018 (Novac), while FILIT (Iaşi International Festival of Literature and Translation) organizes translation residences in the quaint Moldavian village Ipoteşti and holds an annual festival. Each October, FILIT invites international translators from Romanian and showcases their work alongside that of the translated authors. This festival is a very effective way of making translators from various parts of the world fall in love with Romania and facilitates direct contact not only with the source language/source culture but also with new authors and publications. Curated by Monica Joiţa and Monica Salvan, the prestigious cultural weekly *Observator Cultural* has run a series of articles on the literary translation scene in Romania. *Observator Cultural* highlights dominant themes, authors, translators and reception patterns in different countries. Such statistics show that the year of the pandemic was the richest so far in terms of international translations from Romanian (2020). One of the most translated Romanian authors in recent years is the interwar Jewish writer Mihail Sebastian, with several titles in English, including by Gabi Reigh – The Town with Acacia Trees; Women; The Star with No Name and Philip Ó Ceallaigh – For Two Thousand Years; Women. Contemporary names include Nobel-nominee Mircea Cărtărescu, whose novel *Nostalgia*, translated by Julian Semilian, was reissued by Penguin in 2021, and whose monumental *Solenoid* is forthcoming from Deep Vellum in a translation by Sean Cotter; poet Ana Blandiana, dramatist Matéi Visniec and European Union Literature Prize winner Tatiana Ţîbuleac. The latter's visceral pandemic poetry was showcased in 2021 in *Modern Poetry in Translation (MPT)* in my translation, and it is genuinely baffling that her fiction, already available in French, Spanish, German, Polish, Norwegian, Hungarian among other languages, has not yet attracted the right Anglophone publisher.

Probably the most successful showcase of Romanian literature in the United Kingdom has been the ground-breaking "Romania Rocks" festival, co-organized by the European Literature Network (ELN) and the Romanian Cultural Institute in London. Launched online in the Autumn of 2020, it featured a host of events, such as a series in conversations where Romanian authors were paired with British counterparts, such as Ana Blandiana, Magda Cârneci, Ruxandra Cesereanu, Marius Chivu, Andrei Codrescu, Norman Manea, Ioana Pârvulescu, Bogdan Teodorescu and Matei Vișniec appearing alongside Paul Bailey, Vesna Goldsworthy, AL Kennedy, Deborah Levy, David Mitchell, Ben Okri, Ian Rankin, Elif Shafak,

Fiona Sampson, George Szirtes. The Festival also featured a dedicated translator focus and I was honoured to be invited to participate in the panel "Translating Romania" alongside colleagues Diana Manole, Philip Ó Ceallaigh, Gabi Reigh, Andrea Scridon, Adam Sorkin and Lidia Vianu, where we all read from our work in progress and contextualized our practice. The material we discussed covered several literary genres and styles, from poetry to drama and fiction, and included contemporary as well as historically distant pieces. The event grew out of the *Romanian Riveter*, the first collection of Romanian literature to be published in the United Kingdom (launched in September 2020), and was the brainchild of indefatigable ELN-founder Rosie Goldsmith and Carmel West, assisted by Gabriela Mocan and the RCI team led by Magda Stroe. The Romanian Riveter (2020), as well as the "Romania Rocks" festival (2020, 2021) aimed to draw international attention to the most outstanding literary outputs in Romania, and to engineer a debate around current themes and concerns as well as circulation and reception. My contribution to both the publication and the festival centred on the work of multi-award-winning playwright, novelist and poet Matéi Visniec, rooted in an ambition to carve out a space for drama in literary debates and to continue my efforts in raising awareness of this author's work, started with the edited collection *How to Explain the History of Communism to Mental Patients and Other Plays* and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) Literature Award shortlisted novel *Mr K Released*. A second edition of "Romania Rocks", in November 2021, took place in a hybrid format; Mircea Cărtărescu and Miruna Vlada travelled to London and met their readers face to face, while a number of other authors, such as Magda Cârneci, Ioana Pârvulescu, Doina Ruşti, Ioana Nicolaie and Lavinia Braniște joined online. British authors involved this year included Philippe Sands, Georgina Harding, Jonathan Coe, Tessa Dunlop, Monique Roffey, Lionel Shriver and Tracy Chevalier, and were, as before, in dialogue with their Romanian counterparts. The festival's translation panel (entitled "The Arts of Translation: Romanian Literature Across Borders") was also held in a hybrid fashion, with Gabriela Mocan and myself being present at the RCI in London, and Sean Cotter, Diana Manole and Viorica Patea participating online. The focus of the festival being on women writers, we all discussed our work from this perspective, and I showcased my latest stage translation, involving a female author, adaptor and director: Mihaela Panainte's adaptation of Herta Müller's *Niederungen/Ţinutirile joase*, titled *Lowlands* in English. This text has recently been published in the Bloomsbury anthology *Plays from Romania: Dramaturgies of Subversion*, which I edited and translated in 2021. I found it essential to highlight that this work had arisen from my long-standing collaboration with a number of playwrights hailing from Romania and writing in different languages and cultural contexts, including German, Hungarian and Roma. I equally stressed that this book project would not have come to fruition without the involvement of theatre companies with whom we had the opportunity to test my translation in practice, both as works in progress and as actual stage productions. Theatre Y in Chicago and Foreign Affairs in London had literally acted as "godparents" to this book, nurturing my work over the years and overseeing its development through various drafts (Komporaly, "Translating" 164-175 and "Skopje").

This source-culture oriented agenda goes hand in hand with translators initiating projects (rather than being asked by target culture publishers). In this respect, we are looking at a certain independence from the laws of supply and demand, because a fair amount of work is being undertaken without secure publishing prospects. The eminent translator of Péter Esterházy (among others), Judith Sollosy is a firm advocate of this approach, adding that "the most troublesome authors give translators the most creative freedom" (quoted in Sipos et al.). Of course, this approach is hardly workable financially for those without other incomes (most translators of Hungarian/Romanian literature have additional jobs, often in teaching or editing)

and one can rightfully have reservation towards it, but it is an avenue for utmost creative independence, whereby translators can focus on authors without having to worry about commercial viability. This is not to suggest that relevance in an Anglophone context is marginal, but there are translators who feel very strongly about championing authors without the pressure to focus only on voices that are most likely to be assimilated into the target canon. In other words, camouflaging that a particular title is a translation is not on the agenda, on the contrary, the aim is celebrating the unique flavour of texts and contributing to the diversity of the literary ecosystem. Ironically, some so-called "difficult" authors have actually gained major international recognition, such as 2015 Man Booker Prize-winner László Krasznahorkai, who is one of the most translated Hungarian writers and whose latest book *Herscht 07769* has been earmarked for English translation, for New Directions, in tandem with its Hungarian publication. I should add that Ottilie Mulzet is perhaps the only Hungarian-English translator who does not need to follow this supply-driven strategy, and even though she certainly champions authors, she reached a stage of recognition where publishers show interest in her work in its own right and commission her.

The Hungarian Translators' House in Balatonfüred has been the go-to place for those wishing to benefit from such creative freedom for over twenty years, and candidates only have to submit a brief proposal in order to be able to work in excellent conditions on their chosen projects. These projects can be at various stages of development and in any language out of Hungarian, and while the House has its regular returning guests, there is a concerted effort to attract a younger demographic. As Péter Rácz, the founder and managing director of the House has pointed out in a lecture at Collegium Hungaricum in Vienna (Dallos and Rácz), by organizing language-specific workshops in around twelve languages to date, the average age of residents has come down by over two decades. In 2020, I co-lead the first Hungarian-English week-long translation workshop (albeit online due to the pandemic), and we had a fruitful process where participants felt comfortable to volunteer their solutions and to draw attention to the multiplicity of translation strategies available. Instilling this kind of confidence in emerging translators is very important, and it is certainly something I wish I had the opportunity to benefit from when I was starting out. This collaborative sharing has actually continued over recent months in the shape of a regular online translation lab, very much driven by some of the emerging translators. This energy seems to parallel the successful translator-training programme at the Balassi Institute in Budapest, also initiated by Rácz, and there is an annual summer school-cum-translation camp aimed at young translators organized by PRAE.HU in a picturesque location by the Danube that also invites some of the most happening authors of the moment, thus facilitating much needed contact between writers and their prospective translators.

Conclusion

Looking at the current landscape of translators, there is a healthy balance between age groups, which includes people between their twenties and even over-seventies, and geographical locations, such as the United Kingdom, the United States, Hungary, Romania, elsewhere in Europe and the world. There are also multiple approaches that include the experience of translators who have native-level familiarity with the source language or who work in both directions. I practice this myself to some extent, but perhaps most prominent is the case of Lidia Vianu, founder of the Centre for the Translation and Interpretation of the Contemporary Text (CTITC) at the University of Bucharest and of the publishing house Contemporary Literature Press. Vianu translated both eminent Romanian voices into English (Marin Sorescu, Mircea Dinescu), and English authors into Romanian (Joseph Conrad). I am bringing this issue up because less translated languages are also the ones where there is a much higher incidence

of L2 translators. Since these languages are "less often the source of translation in the international exchange of linguistic goods" (Branchadell and West 1), fewer native English speakers invest the effort to acquire them to an adequate standard with a prospective translation career in mind. I find that it is highly patronising and simply inaccurate to state that using L2 translators is a case of settling for second best. In the specific situation of Hungarian/Romanian-English, currently active L2 translators have spent most of their lives in their adopted cultures and are in a unique position to form a genuine bridge between source and target languages. Debates on the topic of translating into "non-native" languages, however, are still necessary, such as discussions on the UK Emerging Translators' Network and the above-mentioned Translators Association panel. There is an urgent need for addressing the potential of both mother tongues and acquired languages in translation, especially if conducted dispassionately and acknowledging broader geopolitical concerns. Seeing that "L2", "non-native" or "inverted" translation are highly charged terms, further theoretical inquiry into this field would be welcome, alongside collegial discussion and practical experimentation. First and foremost, however, all this only makes sense if we advocate utmost linguistic competence and – in Marta Dziurosz's words – emphasize the "importance of the quality of the text produced over the identity of the translator" (27). In this translator testimonial I wanted to show that Hungarian and Romanian to English translation is predominantly marked by a supply-driven agenda, rooted in the passionate commitment of translators and the relative unfamiliarity of publishers in the English-speaking world with these literary traditions. A lot of work is translated on spec (without being sure of success, but with the hope of favourable outcome) and translators actively cold-pitch books to commissioning editors – effectively acting as literary agents, and very few titles are published without the financial contribution of funding bodies or grant schemes. Having said that, both Hungarian and Romanian titles have been nominated for prestigious awards, including EBRD, Warwick Prize for Women in Translation, TA First Translation, PEN Translates, and National Endowment for the Arts, Individual translators have gained wider recognition, such as Ottilie Mulzet, Peter Sherwood, and Len Rix from Hungarian; Adam Sorkin, Sean Cotter, and Alistair Ian Blyth from Romanian. Kidlit events regularly reference Anna Bentley's translation *Arnica, the Duck Princess* (authored by Ervin Lázár) published by Pushkin and *A Fairytale For Everyone* (edited by Boldizsar M. Nagy), forthcoming from Harper Collins, and publications are promoted by the Romanian Cultural Institute and the Hungarian Liszt Institute at international events and book fairs. Currently, the publishing industry is facing a significant backlog in many countries, but self-publishing is slowly taking on (see Zsuzsa Koltay's well-received translation, from the Hungarian, of Nándor Gion's *Soldier with Flower*) and hopefully we shall witness more demand-driven work initiated by target culture agencies as it is the case with more widely translated languages.

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