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Fireside Chat:
Mihaela Cristescu in conversation with three Romanian literary translators

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Mihaela Cristescu (Mihaela): I recently had the privilege of talking to three accomplished literary translators about promoting and celebrating Romanian literature into other languages, most notably English. Adrian George Săhlean, Daniela Andronache and Marius Chelaru shared their experiences as translators and writers. I'd like to start with you, Adrian, and ask about your expertise in translating poetry, short stories, memoirs, plays and children's literature. You are well known in Romania and the United States of America. We would be interested to hear your perspective on translating Romanian literature into other languages. Can you share your thoughts with us?

Adrian George Săhlean (Adrian): I believe my notoriety as a literary translator in the US is somewhat exaggerated, even if I get more recognition of late in Romania for my renditions of Eminescu's works. When we consider the exposure of literary translations in the US from all languages, not just Romanian, the picture is not encouraging. Only 3% of all published books are translations (even worse for poetry, 3% of that 3%) – the market only follows economic supply and demand. Moreover, the sheer volume of what is being published makes it hard for the reader to choose: *l'embarras du choix* as the French say.

A look at the process of translation may put everything into a better perspective. Since identities of vocabulary, metaphors and idiomatic expressions between any two languages are *de facto* impossible, literary translations attempt to find equivalents for them in the target language. It is said that in translating prose, you are the writer's slave, in translating poetry you are the poet's rival. I find this to be true even for blank verse poetry, while the translation of prose is somewhat more approachable. However, meter-and-rhyme poetry rendition is by far the most challenging, because poetic creativity depends on the ability to associate within the extensive vocabulary inventory of that language while observing the mentality of its cultural tradition. Which is perhaps why the best literary translations have been accomplished by poets and writers into their native tongue.

It is encouraging that adequate renditions from Romanian contemporary literature into English – especially of blank verse – are being made by translators who have become proficient in a second language. A growing number of these translations get published now in international journals or appear in cyberspace. Unfortunately, the reality of translating meter-and-rhyme poetry from Romanian, classic or modern, is rather daunting. Romanian and English have diverging mentalities concerning form, style and structure, and the well-meaning attempts to translate Romanian prosody into English have been uniformly awkward. They stand out like sore thumbs, mostly because of the limited linguistic ability in the adopted English idiom. Stringing words together and forcing them to rhyme in artificial meter does not rise to a level that could impress a native speaker as “poetry” and so, ultimately, these attempts do a disservice to the Romanian literary heritage.

Mihaela: Daniela, what are your thoughts on the publication of Romanian literature translated in other languages? Are there any magazines or publishing houses in Romania targeted for translations?

Daniela Andronache (Daniela): When it comes to Romanian literature translated in other languages, I am very much in favour of it. I also think that the well-known Romanian writers deserve to be known in as many countries as possible. Obviously, this depends on the publishing politics and the translation possibilities that the Romanian publishing houses have. If I were to generalize, I would say that the Romanian Ministry of Culture should treat this matter as a cultural priority. As regards your second question, yes, there are several dedicated Romanian literary magazines that publish translations of classical and contemporary Romanian authors into other languages. An example is *Poezia*, a prestigious literary magazine published under the aegis of The Romanian Writers Union. The Romanian Cultural Institute developed a programme of literary translations and compiled a list of Romanian writers whose works are proposed for translation (<https://www.romania-insider.com/icr-translations-2021-dec-2020>).

Mihaela: Marius, you are the founder of *Kadō, Calea Poeziei / Kadō, the Poetry path: Review of Euro-East Poetry, Poetical Culture and Spirituality*; and co-founder of *Carmina Balcanica: Review of South-East European Spirituality and Culture*, and of *Doina, Revue de Littérature, Civilisation et Culture Universelle* (bilingual, French-Romanian, Paris). From your perspective, what are the focus and relevance of these publications in the literary translation landscape?

Marius Chelaru (Marius): First, for the pleasure of reading and understanding a culture, through its decision makers, these are not so close, more or less, to what is considered to be “mainstream”. Publications such as the ones you mentioned can fill a gap, by offering something that big publishers or perhaps “official channels” are not always able or willing to offer. Such publications may give readers from all walks of life a different representation of a cultural and literary space. Ask yourself for example how much you could learn about the literature of another country, through translations featured in publications such as these.

Mihaela: Daniela, you are a teacher, a poet, an essayist and a translator. Tell us about your first translation project.

Daniela: In 2000 I met Germain Droogenbroodt, a Flemish poet, who participated in an International Poetry Festival in the city of Iași, Romania. He had his own publishing house in Spain, his country of residence. At the time, he had already published his collections of poetry translated in different European languages and he asked me to translate his poems into Romanian, which I did. And so, in 2002, my first translation, a collection of poems titled *The Mirror Writing*, was published in Romania.

Mihaela: Marius, you are a writer, a literary critic, a translator and an editor. When did you consider becoming a literary translator, and what role did your professors play in this decision?

Marius: I do not consider myself, and in fact I am not a translator in the classic sense. I started translating because I was working for several literary journals, I was travelling to many places, and I was meeting poets little known in my country. I believe professors play a very important role in everyone’s formative years, and not just in relation to translation. But for me, as I said, becoming a literary translator was not necessarily a goal.

Mihaela: Adrian, you are known for your translations of Mihai Eminescu's poems. Eminescu (1850 – 1889) is recognized as the foremost Romanian lyric poet. Your translations earned several international awards, including the *UNESCO Gold Prize* (2000), the *LiterArt XXI*

Grand Prize (2002) and the *National Centre for Eminescu's Studies Award for Translation* (2016). How important are translation prizes for literary translators?

Adrian: Any recognition for the labour of love which is poetry translation keeps the flame going! The slow recognition at home in Romania detracted somewhat from my contentment. The *LiterArt XXI Grand Prize* (2002) happened in the US, while the *Centre for Eminescu Studies* (2016) granted me the award for the 2nd edition of a volume published in Boston 10 years before, overlooked at the time in Romania. Although I had had success with Eminescu recitals in both US and Canada during the previous 15 years, including the staging of *The Legend of the Evening Star* in Manhattan in 2005 and 2008, my first recital in Bucharest did not happen until 2018. This recital was the by-product of my award for *Migălosul Cronofag/The Painstaking Chronophage* (2014), a collection of essays on prosodic translation voted Book of the Year by my fellow literary translators at the Romanian Writers Union. The recognition from my peers was more rewarding to me than any other prize, alongside the validation of my translations by native speakers – since they were done for their benefit.

Mihaela: Daniela, you have received an important award for your latest collection of poetry. How important is it for a translator to receive such recognition of their work?

Daniela: Yes, I have been awarded the Debut Prize for my collection of poetry *Cireșe în pârg* [Ripe cherries] by the Municipality of Iași and the Iași Cultural Centre. This kind of recognition is undoubtedly important for any artist because it is testament to the artist's value and talent. As a translator, the prize I have been awarded entitles me to think that the more poetical sense I am endowed with, the more successful my translations will be.

Mihaela: Marius, you have been the recipient of many awards in the last few years, and I'd like to highlight two translation awards, the *Cultural Association Duiliu Zamfirescu Award*, Focșani, Romania (2005) and *Maison Naaman pour la Culture Award*, Beirut, Liban (2006). In what ways do such prizes support translators in their work?

Marius: Personally, I am not that much interested in translation prizes, because my main goal is not connected with strategies to win prizes, but I was happy to be awarded a prize for my translations, which include translations of Romanian poetry into English and translations of foreign poets into Romanian. I believe every translator feels inspired when their work is recognized. In Romania, as far as I know, there are some prizes for translation.

Mihaela: Adrian, you hold a Master's Degree in English and Spanish from the University of Bucharest. How did you discover your passion for translation? How did your professors inspire it?

Adrian: I'll get to my teachers in a moment. I believe I was always fascinated by how languages expressed familiar things and realities with other words. The attraction first came in the form of music – from an early age I could remember song lyrics almost automatically if the melody caught my ear. That was true at the time for Romanian and also for the Italian, French and English songs heard on the radio. When I joined the Radio TV children's choir, we also sang in Russian and German. What was being sung was first understood as separate words, gradually expanding to larger meaningful units. I have no doubt that songs were the key factor in my decision to study philology and languages. I could speculate that my attraction was first the music of languages and, subconsciously, the mentalities of languages as well.

My professors at the University of Bucharest, in the English department, were clearly role models, fanning smouldering embers. Some of them gained recognition for translating English literature into Romanian, ranging from Old English and Chaucer, to the complete works of Shakespeare, to the Romantic poets. Dan Duțescu and Leon Levițchi were my favourite translators. In fact, Levițchi became my academic supervisor when I did my doctoral research on *Pitfalls of literary translation from English to Romanian*. In retrospect, it looks almost like foreshadowing my later life. The other important Romanian Anglicists, Dumitru Chițoran, Andrei Bantaș, and Adrian Nicolescu, who were part of my dissertation committee, were supportive of my ideas on British euphemism versus American English overstatement, or my criticisms of questionable “solutions”, even from established translators, that I deemed inadequate. So, with seeds planted during my university studies, after immigrating to the US in 1985, I took the path less travelled of finding pitfalls of the literary “retroversion”, the term I prefer to describe translation from Romanian into English. Living among native speakers of English, I gradually fine-tuned my understanding of the limits of translatability. These were systematized in *Migălosul Cronofag/The Painstaking Chronophage*, in which I reflect on the enormous challenges for translators in tackling meter-and-rhyme in Eminescu’s poetry.

Mihaela: Daniela, how do you feel about the intersection between being a teacher and a translator?

Daniela: Personally speaking, on the one hand, the fact that I am an English teacher has been extremely relevant for my translation work in the sense that it has enabled me to have a profound and subtle understanding of the English words, phrases and idioms. I think I was able to render the meaning of the English poems into Romanian in the most accurate way possible. On the other hand, being a native Romanian speaker has enabled me to do fairly good translations into English – my target language.

Mihaela: I’d like to finish our virtual fireside chat by asking what your top three reasons would be to encourage young translators to study, read and translate Romanian literature into English.

Adrian: I would not use the word “study” because I believe the appeal to study Romanian literature is a matter of individual choice. I’m sure you have come across such self-motivated people, albeit limited in number. Personal recommendations of good translations to personal contacts might be more important than any argument. I would stick to good renditions of blank verse poems and contemporary short stories or novels, maybe even throw some movies in the mix. There is common practice on the internet by Romanians in the diaspora to extol each new attempt from classics in meter-and-rhyme. Driven by “patriotic” and nostalgic pride, no doubt in love with the original, people who post on the internet may have a limited understanding of the quality of the English rendition and their efforts become counterproductive. Mediocre samples actually discourage further explorations into a literature that might seem mediocre.

I am encouraged that the Romanian Cultural Institute, literary circles, magazines and local libraries have become more active in translating and promoting Romanian literature during the pandemic, through Zoom meetings. I believe they will remain standard reach-out modalities in the next few years. Various web sites are also trying to help promote Romanian literature in translation. Literary translators will continue with their labour of love. It should be only too obvious that without their work we wouldn’t understand the beauty of other cultures, and get to know their best writers. Who, among readers, have read the masterpieces of the world’s best authors in the original?

I brought with me to the States my love for Romanian culture and the melancholy for leaving it behind. I discovered here, with sadness, that Eminescu was, and continues to be, very little known in English. I've made it my mission to offer the English readership a glimpse into his original sound and depth of meaning, which rivals the world's best Romantic poets.

I believe that only a limited number of Eminescu's poems can be translated into English as meter-and-rhyme poetry, unfortunately. There are few convincing translations available, and I would confidently suggest to readers my collection *The Legend of the Evening Star & Other Poems and Prose*, now available in print-on-demand in Australia, as a good introduction to Eminescu's great work.

Daniela: I would tell young translators around the world that the study of Romanian literature would connect them with the genuine Romanian ethos, would offer them unexpected insights into a profound and original literary field, and would reveal the unique character of the people living in Dacia Felix (now Romania), the ancient name of the province Dacia during the reign of the Roman emperor Traian.

Marius: First, being appreciated, because translators need to see that somebody is really interested in their work. And support, of course. And this is a debate that is not only about translation, but about how magazines receive and publish translations, the type of translations. And it's also about how publishers in Romania and state-owned institutions are supporting this important creative work.

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