

SEAN COTTER, *LITERARY TRANSLATION AND THE IDEA OF A MINOR ROMANIA*¹ - A REVIEW

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This book is a thought-provoking reflection on translation, based on sustained research and the observation of translational discourses and practices in what the author calls ‘minor’ Romania – a country whose language and literary culture are rather unfamiliar to scholars working in Translation Studies. Sean Cotter, an associate professor of literature and literary translation at the University of Texas and an esteemed translator of Romanian literature, valuably directs our attention to a country that has an intense investment in translation – there is much to learn from Romania’s example, and the facts can often be surprising. In Romania, the publication of a translation can become a real event: the 25,000 copies of Lucian Blaga’s translation of *Faust*, for example, sold out in 3 days; an eyewitness reports that when Blaga delivered a talk on the translation, he spoke ‘to a room so crowded that chairs were torn from the floor and crushed against the walls’. Romania provides a cultural space in which canonical writers could envisage an extraordinarily extensive translation program: they envisaged translating the major works of world literature into Romanian as a vital cultural strategy, but also, perhaps, as a response to the presence of a foreign army in their own country. In Romania, translation enjoys high status and translators are prominent figures in public culture, and this is still the case today. What could such a culture teach scholars working in contemporary Translation Studies?

Sean Cotter focuses his research on Romania’s Communist period, *i.e.* on the discourses and practices of post-World War II Romanian translation. The key concept, and the red thread running through this volume, is ‘the minor’. Cotter challenges the common understanding of the minor as an effect of diminished cultural importance or as a term that implies a certain inferiority complex. Instead, he presents it as ‘an active mode of imagining the nation’ (p. 7), and as

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an interactive model for international cultural exchange and encounter. He also ‘troubles’ some current theoretical models in Translation Studies as they relate to matters of nationhood and power, particularly insofar as they are ‘designed for major nations’ (p. 4). Cotter attempts instead ‘to reimagine transcultural interaction from the perspective of the smaller culture’ (p. 25) and to articulate a discourse ‘beyond the terms set by the more powerful’ (p. 25).

The most convincing arguments for this thesis are delivered in the analysis of the role of translation during the beginnings of Communist regime (chap. 1). With the presence of Soviet troops on Romanian territory immediately after the end of the Second World War (1944 to 1958) a deep process of linguistic-ideological transformation begins. The Soviet Union assigned a key role to the language, regarding it as a ‘means of production’ of the new Communist person. The Soviet Union also deemed literary authors to be ‘engineers of the soul’ (Stalin). Accordingly, the new Communist regime in Romania initiated a massive project of material and ideological importation – translation was to aid in that undertaking. The immense quantity of translations from Soviet socialist realist texts that emerged in this period led to a double foreignization of the Romanian culture and language: the intention was ‘to move the Romanian reader from his domestic subjectivity to a foreign one, in line with the ideology of the Soviet Union’ (p. 28). Part of that exercise involved transforming the Romanian language, such that Latinate vocabulary became Slavicized, and Romanian grammar was modified to resemble Russian constructions. The result was ‘a broad foreignization of Romanian itself, the creation of what is commonly called ‘the wooden language’” (p. 29). This Russified Romanian became the language of original works, and consequently such works sounded like translations.

This is the point where Sean Cotter enters into a critical dialogue with Lawrence Venuti’s universal claims for foreignization as exposed in his classic book *The Translator’s Invisibility* (2nd edition, 2008). Consider some of Venuti’s postulates: ‘The concept of foreignizing can be productively applied to translating in any language and culture’ (Venuti 2008, p. 19). Or ‘Foreignizing translation can be useful in enriching the minority language and culture while submitting them to ongoing interrogation’ (Venuti 2008, p. 20). Or indeed ‘No culture should be considered immune to self-criticism, whether hegemonic or subordinate, colonizer or colonized’ (Venuti 2008, p. 20). But for Cotter, such claims, when inspected with due regard to the case of 1950s Romania, are not only inadequate, they are also ‘ironic’ and ‘disastrous’ (p. 32). In Cotter’s view, the theoretical binaries of foreignization/domestication or hegemony/resistance are ‘tools developed to show the minor how to act like the major’ (p. 33); they translate the minor ‘into something intelligible to readers in major cultures in Europe and the United States’ (p. 33).

The strategies imagined by Romanian translators during the Communist period stand in marked contrast to what one might call ‘major-minded’ discourses on translation. These strategies show that there are other possibilities in respect to ‘the minor’, and indeed that they can mount real resistance to political power. Sean Cotter illustrates these other options and facets of the minor by discussing the translational activity of three key figures in Romanian culture: the poet and philosopher Lucian Blaga (chap. 2), the philosopher Constantin Noica (chap. 3), and the essayist Emil Cioran (chap. 4). They present and represent different ways in which translation became essential to the national imagination.

Lucian Blaga 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. Blaga’s strategy, when confronted with Soviet political and cultural hegemony, is a surprising and unexpected one: he neither stands against it, nor capitulates in the face of power, but interconnects Romanian culture with other cultures through translation and constructs a network of relations with writers from Western European countries. Thanks to this subtle chess move, he creates a force-field in which the Soviet influence is just one influence (powerful nonetheless) among many others. Blaga’s translation projects (realised in an anthology of translations that draws upon very different authors and languages) demonstrate ‘a conscious eclecticism’ that links Romania to a variety of other countries and ‘recontextualizes the Soviets as one of many foreign interferences that have constituted Romanian culture’ (p. 53). Thus, Blaga tries to turn Romania’s political and cultural vulnerability into cultural flexibility. Via translation, he expands the capacity of the minor culture to incorporate multiple influences: ‘Romanian culture cannot assume a major position, an autochthonous cultural independence, but it can embrace the possibilities of minor status’ (p. 71).

Blaga’s translational work literally puts into practice his project to connect ‘minor’ Romanian literature with a variety of foreign influences. He was deeply familiar with the work of other prominent translators (e.g. Ezra Pound and Rainer Maria Rilke) and used their versions in his own translations. He intended to create a community of translators thereby, a translational-poetic network braiding their work with his own Romanian versions, with the result that he developed a complex zone of linguistic and hermeneutic interference. Cotter illustrates this particular kind of translation (‘free translations’) by way of Blaga’s translation of Valéry’s poem *Les Pas* read through Rilke’s translation. Traces of the German version are visible in the Romanian translation, but in Blaga’s text there are also passages where ‘the Romanian does something neither Rilke nor the original author do, and this performance gives the Romanian text a particularity’ (p. 71). And this is ‘because it appears only in Romanian, it is a Romanian creature, a new creation, something beyond simple interference’ (p. 71). Blaga’s version of *Les Pas* is intended to demonstrate ‘the capacity of both

the Romanian language and Romanian culture to find its strength, its heartbeat, in multiculturalism' (p. 71). A culture connected to the community of great Western artists was Blaga's well-reasoned aesthetic and political strategy, his dynamic model of, and for minor Romania.

Constantin Noica is the second case presented in Cotter's book. A first-class philosopher, placed under house arrest for ten years and imprisoned for six years, Noica refused to become a dissident voice, however (defying the expectations of the Romanian community exiled in Paris - among them his friends Mircea Eliade and Emil Cioran), preferring to frame his cultural activity 'as a kind of collaboration with the state' (p. 92). Cotter sees in Noica's cultural-political choices a 'detachment from political power' and an 'identification with translation' (p. 89). This detachment, and this identification, Cotter argues, can be interpreted as alternative possibilities of the minor.

If we want to understand Noica's position, the key text in this regard is his *Memo to the One Above* (1973). For here he defines Romania's role as 'Europe's translator'. In this text, Noica offers a stark image of Romania as a minor nation: it is 'a country without original, particular contributions to the culture of the world'; Romanian intellectuals prefer 'dilettantish improvisation in many fields over rigorous specialization in one'; Romanian culture itself has 'as its best creation only an adaptable, expressive language' (p. 95). But these negative characteristics, even if they do account for Romania's lack of major status, are actually productive in a translational sense: dilettantism also describes the capability to achieve competence in different fields (this, after all, is a key translational competence). The flexible Romanian language provides Romanians with 'the ability to translate anything from any language' (Noica, cited by Cotter, p. 96). Noica turns Romania's apparent weakness into its strength, demonstrating that it is best suited for the role of translation in Europe.

Noica's intense and heterogenous translational practice focused on major philosophical works (by Descartes, Augustine, and Kant, among others) and also literary translations. His practice gives us deeper insights into how we might understand the activity of translation in respect of the minor. Surprisingly, Cotter outlines Noica's translational thinking not by way of his philosophical translational work, however, but by discussing his translation of Cecil Day Lewis's *Sagittarius Rising* – a book about aviation. The critical voice Noica articulates in his translation becomes, for Cotter, emblematic of Noica's understanding of the role of translation and the translator: 'Noica sees the translator as an explainer, one who shows the moral shortcomings of the original author and text' (p. 115). Noica's version of the minor enacts a politics of translation, working alongside the oppressions of power, and endows translation with a critical function, suggesting thereby that translation can be an alternative type of cultural production.

Emil Cioran is the third and last case Sean Cotter presents in this volume. Born in Romania, where he is appreciated as one of the most prominent Romanian intellectuals after World War II, Cioran left the country in the 1940s (as did his lifelong Romanian friends Mircea Eliade and Eugène Ionesco). He settled in Paris and adapted to French culture, and indeed, he was hailed as ‘the greatest French writer to honour our language since the death of Paul Valéry’ (Saint-John Perse). In the chapter dedicated to Cioran, Cotter focuses on two translation stories, each of which reveal variously different perceptions and perspectives on the minor.

The first story is one that Cioran recounted many times: after moving to France, he went on a bike tour, and along the way he undertook to translate Mallarmé into Romanian. But he fully understood ‘the absurdity and the uselessness’ of his effort. This was the moment in which he perceptively grasped the unimportance of the Romanian language and indeed the Romanian nation, and hence turned away from both. In Cotter’s view, however, Cioran actually ‘never abandoned Romanian or Romania’ (p. 117). He continued to correspond with his family and friends in Romania, he kept up-to-date with the culture and politics of the country, and he persisted in speaking fluent Romanian until his death. Cioran was actually trying to explore ways to re-imagine Romania. So, rather than reading Cioran’s story as a rejection, Cotter in fact considers this to be the starting point of Cioran’s ‘turn from a major-minded version of Romania to a minor one’ (p. 117f.). This turn, and the undertaking it implies, was one which occupied Cioran even as he was also working in the French language during the time he lived in France.

During his youth, Cioran cherished emphatic (albeit disappointed) hopes for ‘a Romania with China’s population and France’s destiny’ (Cioran cited in Cotter, p. 118). Such hopes concerned the possibility of a radical transformation that would find its expression – once again – in a translational act. The second story narrates the translation process of *Lacrimi și sfinți* (*Tears and Saints*), the first of Cioran’s books written in Romanian to be made accessible in French. It was published in 1986. The translation – officially ascribed to Sanda Stolojan, in fact – was the occasion for Cioran to express his changed vision of Romania. He was intensively involved in the translational work – cutting, removing or rewriting entire ‘fanatic’ phrases and passages of the original, an original he initially regarded as ‘a major-national text’ (p. 135). The translation presents the readers with ‘a radically changed national imagination, from the anxieties of the ‘minor’ to the minor’s possibilities’ (p. 136). ‘You can become something just as well through the minuscule as through the grandiose’, Cioran writes in a letter to his friend Constantin Noica in 1973. The adapted French translation of *Lacrimi și sfinți* reveals ‘a non-grandiose version’ of Romania, one presented ‘on a human scale, rather than the all-or-nothing scale of the saint’ (p. 141). No longer caught ‘between a dream of greatness and a life of obscurity’ (p. 141), Romania and the

minor could accordingly occupy a more relaxed position, in terms of its cultural prominence, and its relative size. For Cotter, then, 'Cioran's revision gives us the major as a metaphysical nation, while the minor nation has the advantage to actually existing' (p. 142).

To summarize: Sean Cotter's book shows how the category of the 'minor' can help us to understand translation, and to grasp how translation nuances what we mean by the 'minor'. It is clear that this nexus can open up a conceptual space by means of which we can better explore the deep questions of linguistic and cultural identity. The minor can be flexible and dynamic (Blaga), critical (Noica), or realistic (Cioran), but in all cases, it is a notion that does not have to be trapped in its negativity. It can be hugely productive, and Sean Cotter shows this in his analysis of these three Romanian examples. His research on translation and the role of translators in the 'minor' Romania, a 'smaller nation, one born of a hyperengagement with translation; one modelled on, developed within, and expressed through translation' (p. 145), provides Translation Studies with new lines of enquiry. This refreshing perspective on the minor tends to suggest, moreover, that 'going East' would be a promising journey for Translation Studies to undertake – a move towards a space and a context for thinking that Translation Studies scholars have barely begun to discover.