

**“IN THE END THERE IS NO END...’: REFLECTIONS ON SEVERAL RECENT
CULTURAL EXCHANGES BETWEEN ROMANIA AND THE UNITED
KINGDOM**

Elena Nistor

**PhD, Institute of English Studies, School of Advanced Study, University of
London**

Abstract: Under the auspices of the New Millennium and the new realities that encourage the dissipation of borders and backgrounds, lifestyles and aesthetics, personal logicity asserts the importance of non-exclusive subjectivity. These times of increasingly urgent self-communication and demandingly positive mutual understanding are posing the ultimate challenge of the world in the 21st century: to experience difference in equality. As the art of high emotions sublimated into perfect language, poetry is summoned to solve the crisis of self-representation by exploring symbolic paradigms of existence and creating a sense of universal identity that still favours the expression of singular particularities. The daring enterprise of translation facilitates the understanding of the multifarious contemporary spirit and spirituality by uniting languages whose structures are often unrivalled in unconventionality. The act and art of translation lies in the transplantation of creative sensibilities from their original realm into another, sometimes even divergent, cultural context, creating a bridge between distances and differences, cultures and civilisations, collective and individual histories. Contrary to general prejudice, poetry is translatable if the new version is honest and respectful, avoids the trap of interpretive abuse and stays true to the author’s intention. This paper aims to emphasise the importance of translation as a paramount aesthetic factor by presenting the dynamics of the English-Romanian cultural exchanges as illustrated by the poetry anthologies and individual collections published, and the poetry readings, workshops and projects organised over the last few years. Based mostly on the author’s direct experience, the events and publications referred to in the paper – such as the bilingual anthologies published in Romania and the UK, the translation project developed at the English Department of the Bucharest University, the Romanian-UK Tour, the British-Romanian Week – arise as successful acts of cultural inclusion, reflecting an effervescent ongoing process that creates open spaces for ample and complex self-expression within the European dialogue of cultures.

Key words: dialogue of cultures, globalisation, lyrical discourse, poetry, translation

Under the auspices of the 21st century and the new realities that encourage the dissipation of borders and backgrounds, lifestyles and aesthetics, personal logicity asserts the importance of non-exclusive subjectivity. These times of increasingly urgent (self-)communication and demandingly positive mutual understanding are *posing the ultimate challenge of the world in the 21st century*: to experience difference in equality. The key to bridging abrupt splits and to unifying apparently irreconcilable divisions is to bring together separate fragments of thought, feeling and consciousness into a coherent whole, a unique and unifying human experience.

This is the role of the arts: to explore the symbolic paradigms of existence and to create a sense of universal identity that still favours the expression of singular particularities. However, if music and dance, drawing, painting and sculpting convey universal messages by appealing to the senses, poetry is the art of high emotions sublimated into perfect language and as such it resides on sound and silence to encode the entire human experience. An exercise of the mind and soul, and a superior way of apprehending reality, the pure act of individual imagination encapsulates a universe that clarifies, intensifies and enlarges existence, activating extremely personal histories and thus creating a sense of solidarity and belonging in a complex and accurate understanding of sameness and difference. Authentic identity is taboo-breaking: by transgressing personal boundaries, the otherness within connects with the sameness outside. Spatial empathy leads to the discovery of an interior other and, at the same time, an external self – a different sameness and a familiar strangeness as a condition of absolute freedom, as the French thinker Tzvetan Todorov says in his seminal analysis *The Conquest of America. The Question of the Other* (1982): ‘We can discover the other in ourselves, realize we are not a homogeneous substance, radically alien to whatever is not us: as Rimbaud said, *Je est un autre*. But *others* are also “I”s: subjects just as I am, whom only my point of view – according to which all of them are *out there* and I alone am *in here* – separates and authentically distinguishes from myself.’ (Todorov 3)

Reading poetry is a process inconceivable without the freedom of being self and other as an integrated whole. Self, in the sense of not being subject to norms and stereotypes, and thus escaping narrow classification and achieving uniqueness. Other – a familiar alien, a different sameness, an alter inside in complete harmony with the self, as a condition of absolute freedom: the freedom to go outside and beyond the boundaries of the self as an affirmation of the other. The art of fluid syntagms and variable paradigms constantly construes identity in motion: there is always someone else, another, the other, as the self is defined in opposition to other entities – the other in relation to oneself and to another. Thus, identity emerges as a different mosaic of

impressions further conveyed through forms of discourse that revalue otherness within the self and celebrate its outward opening.

The externalisation of identity and the appropriation of alterity are advanced by the daring enterprise of translation. Originating in the Latin word ‘translatio’ (a carrying across, removal, transporting), the act of verbal conversion lies in the transplantation of creative sensibilities from their original realm into another, sometimes even divergent, cultural context, creating a bridge between distances and differences, cultures and civilisations, collective and individual histories. Performed with good faith and noble-mindedness, translation advances an esthetics of contingency justified by unlimited inner and outer expansion which allows identity to become a continuum, with the culture of origin at one extreme and the host culture at the other. And, contrary to general prejudice, poetry is translatable if the new version is honest and respectful, avoids the trap of abusive transliteration and stays true to the author’s intention.

The dawn of the New Millennium has brought the awareness that we are culturally incomplete without translation. Particularly in Europe, the changing circumstances of conjoined structures trigger the need to reinterpret cultural self-sufficiency against a cosmopolitan background and advocate the artistic and aesthetic crossing of frontiers in order to discover a sense of compatibility with the collective identities existing on the old continent. The power of words and the power of imagination give power to the self who thus becomes able to discard seclusion and to (re)shape the personal cultural code by absorbing outside influences.

That translation is a paramount aesthetic factor is reflected in the dynamics of the English-Romanian cultural exchanges illustrated by the poetry anthologies and individual collections published, and the poetry readings, workshops and projects organised over the last few years. They arise as successful acts of cultural inclusion, reflecting an ongoing process that creates open spaces for ample and complex self-expression within the European dialogue of cultures, as perfect instances of what Tzvetan Todorov named ‘the dialogue of cultures’, i.e. ‘a dialogue in which no one has the last word, in which neither voice is reduced to the status of a simple object, and in which we gain advantage from our externality to the other.’ (Todorov 250)

Some contemporary British poets have developed a specific interest in particular Romanian poets and have attempted to understand several specificities of the Romanian language and culture. Among them, Fleur Adcock whose English versions of poems by Grete Tartler (*Orient Express*, 1989) and Daniela Crăsnaru (*Letters from Darkness*, 1991), both published by Oxford University Press, introduced the British poetry-lovers to two of the finest Romanian women poets of the end of the 20th century. Both Tartler’s and Crăsnaru’s poems had been written during the last years of

Communism, some of the most difficult times ever encountered by Romania, and the richly allusive language concealing subtle denunciations of Ceausescu's totalitarian regime must have posed a real challenge to the New Zealand-born poet.

Public interest in Romanian poetry increased after December 1989 and numerous literary journals in the United Kingdom hosted English versions of Romanian poetry in their pages. In 2002, the two volumes of *Orient Express*, a literary journal for EU enlargement countries edited by the poet and literary critic Fiona Sampson in 2002, featured three Romanian women poets representative of their generation: Magda Cârneci, Ioana Ieronim and Diana Manole. Two years later, one of the best-known poetry publishing houses, Arc Publication, issued an anthology of Eastern European poetry, *A Fine Line: New Poetry from East and Central Europe*, edited by Jean Boase-Beier, Alexandra Buchler and Fiona Sampson; the collection included poets from Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia, and the young poet Ioana Nicolaie was among the poets who represented the 'dazzling snapshots of contemporary poetic practices.' (Sampson 13)

As the 'snapshots' generated creative effervescence, these ventures were neither singular nor one way. The London-born poet Fiona Sampson's interplay of sameness and otherness, and philosophical questions displayed in two of her collections, *Folding the Real* (Seren, 2001) and *The Distance Between Us* (Seren, 2006), appealed to the Romanian poetry readers in the versions published by Paralela 45 Publishing House, *Pliind realitatea* (translated by Milijana Vukadinovic and Laura Cristiana) and *Distanța dintre noi* (translated by Ioana Ieronim and Brândușa Prepeliță-Răileanu).

Professor Lidia Vianu, from the English Department of the Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literatures in Bucharest, is one of the contemporary academics who has promoted the ontological mission of translation in crossing the divide between cultures and peoples. In translating a selection of poems by Ruth Fainlight (*Author! Author!/Aurul la rampă*), Mimi Khalvati (*The Poet in the Wall/Poeta din zid*), George Szirtes (*The Ache of Your Otherness/Fiorul că ești altfel*), Alan Brownjohn (*Gasping for Love/Tânjesc după iubire*) and Peter Ackroyd (*The Diversions of Purley/Bucurii din Purley*), Lidia Vianu – winner of the 2005 London Poetry Society biennial Prize for Poetry Translation Corneliu M. Popescu – succeeds in resisting the temptation to divert from the original text either by simple paraphrase or excessive personal interpretation. Although she filters the original poems through her translator's empathy, she rejects the distortion of the word – and, implicitly, the manipulation of the reader. It is a bold attempt that equals 'walking the high-wire', as the translator once confessed.

The need to extend the expressive level beyond strict localisation and cultural arbitrariness has also resulted in the establishment of the Centre for the Translation and Interpretation of the Contemporary Text (CTITC), and the Master Programme for the Translation of the Contemporary Literary Text (MTTLC), both run by Lidia Vianu within the English Department of the Bucharest University. Among the enterprises that focus on the transposition of meaning into an equally significant substance, the most notable is the translation project developed as *poetry pRO*. Started in 2008 as a collaboration between *poetry p f*, administered by the London-based poet and literary agent Anne Stewart, and Lidia Vianu, the project initially involved over 100 contemporary British poets translated into Romanian by 80 MA and PhD students. In time, the joint efforts of the participants have resulted in online publications (Translation Café - http://www.e-scoala.ro/ctitc/translation_cafe.html that later has become <http://revista.mttlc.ro/>), radio shows broadcast by Radio Romania Cultural and collaborations with literary journals such as *Timpul (The Time)*, *Diagonale (Diagonals)*, *Constelații diamantine (Diamond Constellations)*, *Nord Literar (Literary North)*, *Pro Saeculum*, *Regatul Cuvântului (The Realm of the Word)*, *Orizont literar contemporan (Contemporary Literary Horizon)*.

To celebrate the first year of successful joint efforts, Anne Stewart organised a Romanian UK Tour (20 March-2 April 2009) and the launch of the bilingual anthology *And The Story Isn't Over...*, together with the CD *And the Story So Far...* which included private recordings by the poets themselves and excerpts from *Poezie universală (World's Poetry)*, the radio shows edited by Dan Verona. With the generous support of Arc Publications and the Romanian Cultural Institute in London, the Tour included readings from over 20 poets participating in the *poetry pRO* project, as well as a translation workshop at the University of Middlesex. Lavinia Zainea (MA student) and Elena Nistor (PhD student) were the Romanian representatives of their fellow translators of the Bucharest University. Two weeks, over 1,000 mile travels across the UK and seven events in Camden, York, Cambridge, Teddington, Southsea and the Romanian Cultural Institute in London provided an experience of close communion with poetry and a sense of compatibility with essential European values (<http://www.poetrypf.co.uk/poetrypro09tour.html>).

In 2009, the project was extended as *RoPRO* to include the translation and publication of Romanian poetry and in 2011, Contemporary Literature Press has been created to publish online bilingual collections. Several texts were published, including a bilingual collection, *Dan Verona: Selected Poems/Poeme alese* (2011), translated from Romanian by MTTLC members and polished by *poetry p f* poets. It was followed by *It might take me years.../Mi-ar trebui un șir de*

ani (2013), ‘a collection of simple, transparent and unsophisticated poems’ (Abăluță 10) by Adrian Alui Gheorghe, Magda Cârnelci, Dumitru Chioaru, Denisa Comănescu, Nichita Danilov, Simona-Grazia Dima, Mircea Dinescu, Gellu Dorian, Horia Gârbea, Bogdan Ghiu, Adela Greceanu, Ioana Ieronim, Vasile Ignat, Nora Iuga, Mircea Ivănescu, Cassian Maria Spiridon, Grete Tartler, Doina Uricariu, Ioan Vieru, Claudia Voiculescu, Horia Zilieru (to name only a few), translated by MA students and polished by 21 English poets.

The latest anthology, *My Cup of Light. An Anthology of Romanian Poetry. Parallel Texts* (2014), translated by Lidia Vianu and polished by Anne Stewart, includes poets born between 1941 and 1983, from Angela Marinescu and Ioana Ieronim to Ion Zubașcu and Liviu Ioan Stoiciu, from Nichita Danilov and Andrei Zanca to Traian T. Coșovei and Marta Petreu, from Matei Vișniec and Carmen Firan to Robert Șerban and Dan Mircea Căpăriu, and from Alexandru Mușina and Domnica Drumea to Elena Vlădăreanu and Claudiu Komartin. It is ‘a book of two generations, divided by the fall of the Iron Curtain’ and united by ‘the awareness that they are all speakers of a small language’ (<http://editura.mttlc.ro/my-cup-of-light-vianu.html>).

However, even small languages and cultures deserve attention in the new context created by the European Union. Romania has been successfully represented at international book fairs and literary festivals along the past few years. Editors and translators have gathered together past and present poets in quasi-exhaustive anthologies, with the ambitious aim to offer an accurate image of the Romanian lyrical discourse. The bilingual edition *Testament: Anthology of Modern Romanian Verse* (Minerva, 2012; revised in 2015) is a comprehensive anthology of Romanian poetry from 1850 to 2012, in which editor Daniel Ioniță, together with Eva Foster, Daniel Reynaud and Rochelle Bews, brings forward representative Romanian poets: Vasile Alecsandri, Mihai Eminescu, George Coșbuc, Tudor Arghezi, Octavian Goga, Ion Minulescu, George Bacovia, Ion Pillat, Ion Barbu, Lucian Blaga, Radu Gyr, Magda Isanos, Ștefan Augustin Doinaș, Nichita Stănescu, Nicolae Labiș, Grigore Vieru, Marin Sorescu, Ileana Mălăncioiu, Ana Blandiana, Adrian Păunescu, George Țârnea, Mircea Cărtărescu, etc. The selected poems have been popular since their first publication and have become emblematic, owing to their suggestive metaphors, real-life topoi and unpretentious language that appeal to common readers.

Thus, socialisation of poetry has come naturally, as proof that ‘the romance of reading has not faded entirely, even today.’ (Hartman 248) Popularising poetry and poets does not pertain to consumerism; it is rather a matter of making culture accessible to the general public. Public readings are one of the most direct forms of creating a synergy between the poet and his/her audience: to provide an immediate and unmediated response is to experience sameness in

otherness, i.e. to enter the world of the poet and participate in the creative act, since ‘the real value of the poem lies in what it means to the reader.’ (Copus 66) Public events are aimed to allow the readers to assign their own meaning to poetry. ‘Poet in the City’ is a poetry organisation founded in 1998 by the Poetry Society; it became an independent charity in 2006 and currently runs major poetry events, mainly in central London, where renowned British and international poets, writers and artists present poetry in innovative ways. As part of its work, in 2011 the charity joined the Romanian Cultural Institute in London in developing the *Contemporary Romanian Poets* series with the specific purpose of exploring Romanian culture through the eyes of some of its most accomplished poets: Andrei Bodi, Denisa Comănescu, Vasile Gârneț, Bogdan Ghiu, Claudiu Komartin and Miruna Vlada were invited to present their creation to the insular public. Their most acclaimed poems were translated by Christopher Bakken, Florin Bican, Adam J. Sorkin and Virgil Stanciu, and compiled in the bilingual anthology *Contemporary Romanian Poets* (<http://www.icr-london.co.uk/article/romanians-at-poet-in-the-city-the-anthology.html>).

In November 2015, poet Maggie Sawkins – winner of the 2014 Ted Hughes Award for New Work in Poetry – had the initiative of organising another Romanian evening at Tongues&Grooves, one of the most popular poetry organisations in southern England. Devised under the generous *Poetry in Translation* series as a follow-up to the Southsea event in March 2009, the reading ‘From Romania With Love’ was held at the Square Tower, a historical building in Portsmouth, and featured the poets Denise Bennett, Mark Cassidy, Pauline Hawkesworth, Richard Peirce, Maggie Sawkins, Gareth Toms and Richard Williams. The reading intertwined the poets’ original work with the Romanian versions provided by Elena Nistor and the music by the local band The Polite Mechanicals (<https://tonguesandgrooves.com/2015/10/30/from-romania-with-love/>). The large audience evinced a genuinely enthusiastic interest not only in the Romanian language and poetry but also in the process of translation, which turned the reading into a dialogue with the Romanian translator (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cGZRAbG6WME>).

Most recently, between 18 and 23 April 2016, the Romanian Cultural Institute hosted the British-Romanian Week, organised together with the Bucharest University, the National Museum of Romanian Literature and the Headsome Communication Association, in partnership with the British Council Bucharest, the English Department of the Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literatures, the *Contemporary Literature Press* Publishing House, the Research Centre for the Translation and Interpretation of the Contemporary Text (CTITC), the National Book Centre, the

Romanian Writers' Union. To mark the 10th anniversary of the Master Programme for the Translation of the Contemporary Literary Text (MTTLC), Lidia Vianu invited the poets Maggie Butt, Katherine Gallagher, Alwyn Marriage, Jeremy Page, Peter Phillips and Anne Stewart to run literary translation workshops. Each poet worked with 12 graduate MTTLC students, translating and polishing contemporary poets such as Ana Blandiana, Nora Iuga, Angela Marinescu, Emil Brumaru, Mircea Cărtărescu, Robert Șerban and Radu Vancu. Coincidentally (or not), the week ended on 23 April with a panel and reading at the British Council, where the poets talked about Shakespeare and his influence upon contemporary British poetry, and read a selection of the Bard of Avon's best-known Sonnets, as well as their own work.

As seen from these few examples, the challenges of the 21st century impose a remarkably intense desire to establish a well-defined space for the articulation of sameness and difference altogether. One such space should be Europe since, in an optimistic view, the new European identity acquisition will retrieve and renew the essentialist notion of nationalism, not in the sense of conservatism and traditionalism but as more active and participatory engagement. In this complex process of identity re-formation on a pan-European basis, there is need to apprehend and comprehend the specific local and regional identities in terms of cultural expression. The act – and art – of translation transcends all matters of cultural alienation through access to language which thus becomes a medium through which creativity can travel without restrictions, constraints and inhibitions. In this imaginary journey from one country to another, from one nation to another, from one individual to another, the real concern should be to identify the universal nature and intrinsic differences in the collective identities existing in Europe, which should give a strong sense of communion on grounds of absolute equality and perfect congruence. Verbal and spiritual transposition plays a paramount part in situating the subject within the community and facilitating the connection between the inside and the outside: there is mutual dependence of the physical environment on the self and the knowledge existing inside, with poetic imagination in-between creating an alternative reality that externalises knowledge. It is a fluid process of mutual deconstruction and reconstruction that yields renewed meanings and significances both to the Self and the Other – a process in progress which indicates that

In the end there is only beginning.

The petals of light scattered

On the dark inflame new fires

We blow to torch us with our dying breath.

Lit by our own stars we burn and in the end there is no end.

(Duffy 11-5)

Bibliography

Abăluță, Constantin. 'Foreword/Argument.' *It might take me years.../Mi-ar trebui un șir de ani. The Romanian PEN Club. An Anthology of Poetry.* Edited by Lidia Vianu. București: Contemporary Literature Press. 2013. 10-11

Copus, Julia. 'The more I write, the more I value clarity'. Lidia Vianu. *Desperado Essays-Interviews.* București: Editura Universității din București. 2006. 62-67

Hartman, Geoffrey H. 'The Fate of Reading'. *The Fate of Reading and Other Essays.* Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press. 1975. 248-274

Duffy, Maureen. 'Amen'. *Collected Poems 1949-1984.* London: Hamish Hamilton Ltd. 1985. 29

Sampson, Fiona. 'Introduction'. Jean Boase-Beier, Alexandra Buchler and Fiona Sampson (Eds.). *A Fine Line. New Poetry from Eastern & Central Europe.* Todmorden: Arc Publications. 2004. 13-15

Todorov, Tzvetan. *The Conquest of America. The Question of the Other.* Translated by Richard Howard. New York: Harper & Row Publishers. 1982

Vianu, Lidia. *My Cup of Light. An Anthology of Romanian Poetry 2014. Parallel Texts.* Translated into English by Lidia Vianu and Anne Stewart. București: Contemporary Literature Press. 2014. <http://editura.mttlc.ro/my-cup-of-light-vianu.html>