

*The Translations of Fiction into Romanian and
Romanian Fiction
(A Comparative Study Regarding
the Period 2006–2010)*

Only a few days ago, *Forbes* magazine published a top of the most important publishing houses in Romania. The article that comments upon the top is written by Petre Barbu, himself a novelist, and Raluca Bara-Iacob (Barbu, Bara Iacob 2011). The top includes 46 publishing houses starting with the strongest one, Adevărul Publishing House and ending with Excelsior Art. The annual turnover of Adevărul Publishing House is of 40.002.000 euro in 2010 but the figures are valid for the entire holding, including the top selling Romanian newspaper. The next publishing house is Litera International with an annual turnover of about 10 million euro. The top ten Romanian publishing houses are, for 2010: Adevărul, Litera International, Polirom, Curtea Veche Publishing, Art Editorial Group, ERC Press, Humanitas SA, Paralela 45, Teora and RAO Publishing House. (*Ib.*) I shall make a few comments regarding this matter. First, Adevărul publishing house started to publish collections of great classic writers of the world's literature at low prices. The advertising campaign has been extremely strong, the publishing house underlining strongly that the books are bound in ecologic leather. At the "Braşov Book and Music Fair" in 2007–2008 there were long lines of people waiting to buy the books from Adevărul publishing house. Another recent phenomenon is that Adevărul Publishing House opened its own book shops in the most important cities of the country. So, the pressure at the book fairs has become lower. Adevărul Publishing House used to sell the books with the Adevărul newspaper. These past few months they have published several novels by F. M. Dostoevsky and in October they will publish the works of Leo Tolstoy. The connection between the newspapers and the book market is one of the most important phenomena in Romania in the last five years. The first newspaper which sold books with daily edition was "Cotidianul" in a partnership with Univers Publishing House, "Cotidianul" published contemporary literary works of foreign writers, most of them being the second or the third edition. Another newspaper, "Jurnalul

național”, republished a collection which was famous during communism, “Biblioteca pentru toți”, (“Library for everyone”), editing the classic works of Romanian literature.

In this context, Adevarul Publishing House came up with the idea of publishing the great works of world literature. It has become a great success with very positive effects on the public who started to buy books again. On the other hand, it is very interesting to see how the collections and the ideas of the collections were linked with the general political orientation of the newspapers. “Cotidianul” as well as “Adevarul” have supported the center-right ideas while “Jurnalul național” supports the left with nationalist tendencies. “Jurnalul național” invented what they called “the resistance movement” promoting writers such as, for instance, Adrian Păunescu, Ceaușescu’s bard, or folk singers who evoked the “good, old times”. As for the Romanian book market in the last five years, the books edited by newspapers are, I think, a phenomenon of great and positive impact on what we call the “great public”. Of course, there are critical voices. Some of them, coming from important editing houses suggest that some books are not translated completely, or that the books have hard covers but the paper inside is of poor quality and so forth.

Going back to the ranking published by “Forbes”, all the first ten publishing houses have a complex offer, an offer in which fiction is a more or less an important part. Teora publishing house, for instance, does not publish fiction at all, Paralela 45 sells mainly didactic auxiliary materials, Humanitas has a various offer, in which, indeed, fiction is an important part, and the same is valid for Polirom. In order to find out some details regarding the quantity of fiction sold by Polirom in the last three years I asked and received some specific data for this paper from Claudia Fitcoschi, promotion editor at Polirom Publishing. In 2008, foreign and Romanian fiction represented 49% of the whole amount of sales, 41% being represented by translations and 8% by original Romanian fiction. In 2009, 53% of the sales represented fiction, 43% foreign fiction and 9% Romanian fiction. In 2010, fiction constituted 37% of all sales, 28% being translations and 9% original Romanian fiction. The first observation that can be made is that the figures are very similar every year. Then, it is interesting that in 2009, the first year of economic crisis in Romania, the sales of fiction were more significant than non-fiction sales. Regarding the proportion between the sales of foreign fiction and those of Romanian contemporary fiction, it has been of 5 to 1, every year since 2008. Generally, we may say that for every five fiction translations, Polirom sold a Romanian original fiction book. But is this the Romanian typical case? Not really. Most Romanian authors want to publish at

Polirom because of the distribution and of the way in which books are promoted. Therefore, at Polirom, good and very good Romanian writers are generally published.

Going back to the ranking, we have to point out that only four or five of the ten publishing houses are interested in Romanian contemporary fiction. The most important in this field is, as I said, Polirom. Humanitas publishes only several authors, building up collections of authors. The most famous Romanian writer of the moment, Mircea Cărtărescu, is a “Humanitas author”. Paralela 45 had, when it started, a very ambitious programme of publishing Romanian contemporary fiction. The owner, Călin Vlasie, an important poet of the 1980s, and Gheorghe Crăciun, one of the most important contemporary writers in Romania, had set up a plan and programme which started vigorously and has become increasingly weaker. In 2007 Gheorghe Crăciun died. Paralela 45 still publishes Romanian fiction in, for instance, the “Romanian library” collection, but the president, Călin Vlasie oriented the publishing house towards translations. Curtea Veche Publishing is centered on publishing non-fiction and the Art editorial group publishes collections of authors, similarly with Humanitas. For instance, Gheorghe Crăciun’s works are published by Art.

Of course, when we discuss Romanian contemporary literature that is released by the above mentioned publishing houses we have to point out that we mostly talk about novels, sometimes about short stories and only rarely about poetry. Only Polirom, with its subsidiary Cartea Romaneasca, and Paralela 45 publish Romanian poetry in two collections.

After this brief analysis of the first ten Romanian publishing houses we have to draw attention to another phenomenon occurring in the past five years. Romanian poetry and fiction migrated to some small and ambitious publishing houses. The most important phenomenon in this field is, in my opinion, Tracus Arte publishing house. Led by Ioan Cristescu, this publishing house succeeded in publishing several excellent books of Romanian contemporary poetry and fiction. These small publishing houses generally prove to have more courage in promoting avant-garde works of Romanian writers. Even if undoubtedly less financed than the top ten I mentioned, Tracus Arte accepts risky investments. I shall give as example, for this specific situation in Romania, the verse novel *Euromorphotikon* by Caius Dobrescu, an excellent book with global questions regarding the 1968 inheritance. First, the author offered the book to Polirom which had published his previous novel *PhD Thesis* (Teză de doctorat) in 2008. *Euromorphotikon* was rejected by Polirom, the main reason being that there was no public demand for verse novels in Romania. There is also, I believe, a kind of

reluctance to a literary genre with a weak tradition in Romanian literature as well as a conservative vision of it as being a hybrid form even though it is traditionally the oldest literary form in world literature. I may say that it was this conservative attitude and not the economic aspects that prevented Dobrescu's verse novel from being published. In 2010 Tracus Arte took the initiative and published *Euromorphotikon*. (Dobrescu 2010)

From the reactions to the book, only one that appears to be symptomatic for the way in which these hybrid forms are perceived in our literature is worth mentioning. *Euromorphotikon* was nominated for the Romanian Writers' Union Award in the poetry section even if it is a novel, written in verse but still a novel. Moreover, the other reactions to the book were foreseeable judging by the orientation of the Romanian book market. Namely, there were several reviews, not too many, and no debate whatsoever about the importance of the book. To some extent, the critical echoes were a consequence of the fact that the book had been published at a small publishing house. On the other hand and more importantly, it seemed that the reluctance of the Polirom editorial board had spread among Romanian literary critics as well.

On the other hand, the greatest problem of small publishing houses is distribution. Tracus Arte tries to compensate for the fact that there is no demand for its books in bookshops by organizing different literary meetings in different cities of the country or by using their web site in order to sell their products. For poetry and for an important part of Romanian contemporary fiction, the alternative is provided by small publishing houses. It is interesting to point out that the Romanian Writers' Union Award for poetry in 2009 and 2010 was conferred to Alexandru Mușina for *Regele dimineții* (*The King of the Morning*) published at Tracus Arte (Mușina 2009) and to Ion Mureșan for *Cartea-Alcool* (*The Alcohol-Book*) published at Charmides, another small publishing house (Mureșan, 2010). Furthermore, the Award for best novel was conferred, in 2010, to Radu Mareș for a novel published at Limes, another small but very active publishing house. (Mareș, 2010)

It is clear that for the past five years the fiction map in Romania has been dominated by translations. In the largest publishing houses, the best ratio of original Romanian fiction to foreign fiction is of 1 to 5. On the other hand, a very significant segment of Romanian poetry and fiction migrated to the small publishing houses. It remains to be seen in the following years if the fate of Romanian original literature would change.

References

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