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Orientalizar u occidentalizar (Re)Traducir Rumania a través de la literatura de viajes

Going East or West? (Re)translating Romania through Travel Books

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Resumen

Los propósitos de este artículo son: i) describir las estrategias antagónicas a través de las cuales la literatura de viajes contemporánea sobre Rumania, escrita por autores británicos y estadounidenses, se tradujo en términos lingüísticos y culturales para lectores rumanos; ii) señalar algunas distorsiones por parte de los traductores, y sus consecuencias en cuanto a la recepción de las traducciones, en particular cuando a la empresa en su conjunto se le asociaban proyectos ideológicos; iii) analizar el modo en que las "traducciones culturales" de Rumania realizadas por autores anglo-estadounidenses y destinadas a sus propias culturas ("orientalización" y "des-europeización" son los casos más obvios) tienden a verse reforzadas, e incluso son exageradas, en manos de traductores rumanos; iv) mostrar la manera en que los traductores recurren a estrategias de domesticación con el objeto de simplificar y erradicar las novedades que los autores extranjeros advierten en la cultura rumana, eliminando así el elemento "exótico" de la ecuación; v) por último, defender el uso coherente de una estrategia de

Abstract

This article seeks: i) to describe the antagonistic strategies through which contemporary travel books on Romania by contemporary British and American authors were culturally and linguistically translated for the Romanian readers; ii) to highlight a series of distortions operated by the translators, and their consequences for the translation reception, particularly when ideological projects are associated with the whole enterprise; iii) to analyse how the "cultural translations" of Romania operated by the Anglo-American authors for their own cultures - the most obvious of which are Orientalization and de-Europeanization - tend to be reinforced and even exaggerated by the Romanian translators themselves; iv) to show how translators resort to strategies of domestication in order to flatten and annihilate what the foreign authors perceive as new and strange in the Romanian culture, thus eliminating the "exotic" element from the equation; v) to ultimately plead for the coherent use of a strategy of (further)foreignization through which translators will be able to preserve the

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(sobre)extranjerización mediante la cual los autores puedan preservar la convención de des-familiarización al tiempo que logren aproximarse a problemas de identidad cultural de un modo más distante y adoptar un rol más activo en la mediación entre los autores extranjeros y sus lectores locales.

Palabras clave

Traducción; (re)traducción cultural; orientalización; (sobre)extranjerización.

defamiliarization convention while approaching problems of cultural identity in a more detached manner, and playing a more active part in mediating between the foreign authors and their domestic readers.

Keywords

Translation; cultural (re)translation; orientalization; (further)foreignization.

Introduction

In recent years, travel writing has been approached in different ways, one possible direction, rooted in the post-colonial discourse, focusing on the tension between the Western observer and the Eastern observed, between the Western traveller / narrator and the Eastern inhabitant, as characters in the travel narrative with all the geopolitical consequences this asymmetrical relationship may entail. However, after the fall of communism, a parallel has been increasingly drawn between the neo-colonial discourse, and its possible relevance to the situation of the former communist countries located, this time, in Central and Eastern Europe. The tension is at stake here between the developed Western Europe and its Eastern “peripheries”, between the “truly national cultures that defy translation” in the West and the cultures of translation and imitation in the East (Baer 2012: 4), between major and minor European discourses (Cotter 2014: 7).

From a Romanian perspective, the travels described in this paper involve no exotic destination. In Urbain’s terminology (1998) they are *endotic* trips, undertaken to places that are familiar to the Romanian readers of these translated travels (as opposed to *exotic* ones). Similarly, according to Cronin’s distinction (2000:17), they could be regarded as “fractal” travels, to an easily reachable geographical space: Romania itself, as described by two contemporary Anglo-American authors-travellers Robert Kaplan (1993) and Mike Ormsby (2008). My investigations concern not only the source texts [ST] as such, which are cultural translations of Romania by these authors for their (Western) home audiences, but mainly the linguistic translations and cultural retranslations of these books into Romanian, with obvious repercussions on issues of cultural identity. After all, “[w]hen information crosses borders via translation”, says Christina Schäffner, “the effects may be varied: it may be that the local culture uses this information to re-identify itself, to delimit itself from other cultures and thus to evaluate itself higher (or lower); or common and different aspects may become obvious, thus achieving mutual understanding in the sense of a growing awareness of differences” (1999: 97-98).

Translating Romania through negative clichés: Robert Kaplan, *Balkan Ghosts* (1993)

Travel writings are extremely rich sources of ethnic images and clichés that travellers use in order to culturally translate the exotic places for their readers, in keeping with the latter’s expectations and mental mapping. One of the main strategies (from many more) through which the American journalist Robert Kaplan, author of *Balkan Ghosts* (1993/2005) filters

and disseminates information about Romania in a condensed form is the cliché,² that is either directly expressed or vicariously triggered by a particular geographical location.

The displacement of Romania into the Balkan area, so full of negative connotations on the Anglo-American geopolitical map³ anticipates for the readers the gloomy picture of the country that the author wishes to convey –with a history of violence and a long period of stagnation during the communist age. The association to the Balkans also means a cultural translation of Romania in the Oriental direction, “Orientalism” being, in Said’s words, “a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between *the Orient* and (most of the time) *the Occident*” (2003: 20). In the third (longest) part of the book, the country is introduced and the readers’ interpretation apriorically framed in a negative direction through a motto and a cliché in the title, which precede the travel narrative proper. The motto *The Devil in Rumania lives a strenuous and tireless life* (from Emil Hoppé’s *In Gipsy Camp and Royal Palace*, published in 1924) associates the country to the devil and, by extension, to Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*. The cliché in the title completes the country’s name, “Romania: *Latin Passion Play*”. The cliché of the passion play is repeated several times throughout the narrative in order to be kept vivid in the readers’ minds.

Moreover, through the technique of representation that Carl Thompson (2011: 69) calls the “principle of attachment”, the unknown is more easily “attached” to the known. Here is one of the first collective portrayals of the Romanians drawn by Kaplan through other ethnic associations: “The atmosphere was wintry, Slavic. Yet, the people were dark, almost South-American looking; the language was a Latinate one, in some respects closer to the ancient Roman tongue than modern Italian or Spanish” (2005: 63).

A series of negative clichés work as shortcuts in the presentation of various regions of the country, undermining any (unlikely) attempt to use parts of this text (as has sometimes been the case with other travelogue pages) for tourist purposes: The Danube Delta (famous for its beauty and very popular tourist area) is introduced as *The Danube’s Bitter End* (title of Chapter 6), whereas the initial image for the region of Moldavia is a kind of negative logo preparing the readers for the worst: *Moldavia: conditioned to hate* (title of Chapter 7). In an overly deterministic manner, Kaplan culturally translates the country for his Western readers resorting to purely subjective, highly speculative and scientifically ungrounded associations between ethnic origins, natural scenery, historical, cultural and religious factors and psychological profile:

Romanian manners have always been an unfortunate and dangerous palimpsest, which is precisely what attracted authors and journalists to them in the first place. Atop the Latin bent for melodrama was a Byzantine bent for intrigue and mysticism, inherited from the Orthodox religion and from centuries of Byzantine political and cultural influence. This mystical streak was further intensified by the Carpathian landscape itself, darkened by fir forests and teeming with wolves and bears, out of which arose a pantheon of spirits and superstitions and the richest folk culture in Europe. It was no

² Manfred Beller defines clichés as “reductions of a formulaic expression”, unlike stereotypes “which also contain valorizing moral and metaphysical aspects” (2007: 297).

³ “From the assassination that triggered World War I to the ethnic warfare in Serbia, Bosnia, and Croatia, *the Balkans have been the crucible of the twentieth century, the place where terrorism and genocide first became tools of policy*” [my emphasis]. This is the blurb of the book, which can be found not only on the book jacket but also on all the websites of promotion (e.g. amazon.com, us.macmillan.com, goodreads.com, abebooks.com, etc). It projects, from the very beginning, a strongly negative image of the Balkan area, to which, from a strictly geographical perspective, Romania does not belong.

accident that Bram Stoker, the Dublin-born author of *Dracula*, situated his novel in Romania (2005: 70).

This accumulation of strong (past and present) clichés reinforces and perpetuates, frequently for a very long time, mental pictures of people and places. In Patrick Holland and Graham Huggan's words, "*Travel writing [...] is hardly harmless, and [...] behind its apparent innocuousness [...] lies a series of powerfully distorting myths about other (often non-western) cultures*" (2000: 8). Such was the impact of *Balkan Ghosts* that it seems to have had a decisive share in president Bill Clinton's decision not to interfere in the Balkan conflict (cf. Thompson 2011: 159).

Translation is the ideal channel for a wider propagation of these clichés, and of more complex resulting ethnic images; it could thus be said that translations globalize individual (frequently highly subjective, even idiosyncratic) perspectives on different geographical areas. Conversely, when the translation is targeted at the very country and people which form the object of the Western traveller's scrutiny, (as is our case here) implications may be inwardly oriented, diverse and unexpected. *Balkan Ghosts* was translated into Romanian by Diana Grad in 2000, then reedited in 2007. Its translation certainly aroused certain interest –and curiosity– among the target(ed) readers. However, a closer investigation of the cultural strategies the translator used in retranslating⁴ the country for her home audience reveals both a certain inconsistency and an insufficient awareness of the consequences the use of particular cultural strategies may trigger. In the Romanian translation of the book the relocation and ensuing Orientalization of the country is preserved through the literal rendition of the title (*Fantometele Balcanilor / The Ghosts of the Balkans*),⁵ whereas the subsequent clichés in the ST are either directly / literally approached or through two opposing strategies: one of them, which I would call *attenuation*, consists in toning down and thus "taming" a series of strong stereotypes, the result being less (or slightly less) offensive clichés for the Romanian readers.

Examples:

1. in the metaphorical association of the Balkans to "Europe's forgotten rear door", *forgotten* is (intentionally?) omitted from the Romanian translation.
2. another strongly emphasized cliché addressing Romanians as an ethnic community,

the violence, along with the religious rites that surrounded the burial of the victims, bore a theatricality and ghoulishness that revealed a people driven by the need to act out of their passions in front of a mirror over and over again (2005: 63)

is flattened, in other words less emphatically rendered, through the deletion of "over and over again".

On the other hand, the strategy working in the opposite direction is that of *hyperbolization*, achieved through added emphasis and / or exaggeration. When applied to translating clichés, it leads to a stronger stigmatization, even demonization of something that was already distorted and oversimplified:

"The Balkans were the original Third World long before the Western media coined the term"- [back translation from Romanian] "the Balkans were the real Third World...";

⁴ I regard this as an operation of linguistic and cultural *retranslation*, as the country was already culturally translated for a foreign audience by the author of the book.

⁵ After all, from a strictly geographical perspective, Romania is not in the Balkan peninsula, and Romanians do not regard themselves as belonging to that area that has been also, somehow forcefully, imposed, a long time ago, by other "Western eyes".

[people in the Balkans] “have been isolated, poverty and ethnic rivalry dooming them to hate” (2005: 6) –in the Romanian translation ‘dooming’ is replaced by an even stronger verb– cursing them to hate.

Apart from striking some kind of balance between moderation and hyperbolization in the translation of a number of clichés, the Romanian translation of *Balkan Ghosts* is mainly literal, so much so that even a number of historical inaccuracies are left as such in the translation. However, there is one significant instance in the target text in which the translator’s voice is clearly heard. A footnote in the book shows that the presentation by the Jewish American author of the events during World War II “needs to be taken with a grain of salt as the author seems to have drawn on propagandistic rather than historical documents” (2008: 132, my translation). It is therefore, through a direct, straightforward warning, an “extratextual gloss” (cf. Aixelá 1996) rather than through a more systematically carried out “agenda of translator visibility along Venuti’s lines” (1995), that the Romanian translator ultimately delimits herself from passages in the ST which she regards as insufficiently grounded, excessive and downright unfair. Nevertheless, her overall ideological position as reflected in the translation strategies she uses is one of indecision between faithfulness and distancing, hyperbolization and toning down, visibility and (more often than not) textual invisibility.

Translating for “a double readership”: Mike Ormsby’s *Never Mind the Balkans, Here’s Romania* (2008)

The Balkans once again emerge in the title of a book about Romania even if, this time, they function as a kind of “familiar backdrop” to the international audience of the book, a geographical background which is only intended to ironically emphasize the uniqueness of a country (dis)located somewhere, in the Balkan region. However, one question that may legitimately arise is whether Mike Ormsby’s 57 vignettes / short stories are “real” travel texts. The answer is that they should be regarded as such, as the subtitle of the translated book is “Călător străin updated” [*Foreign Traveller: Updated*], a creative translation solution of which the author of the book was fully aware.⁶ Consequently, for this particular case too, we should be prepared to further expand, in the direction of psychological inquiries, the “permissiveness” of the field of travel writing, the generic flexibility of which has already been amply acknowledged. In fact, the theoreticians’ opinions on what should count as travel writing are so diverse⁷ that, in time, it has increasingly become an area in which the travel narratives proper overlap with genres and subgenres pertaining to anthropology, ethnography, journalism, cultural studies, fiction, etc.

Ormsby’s stories, belong to what has been called “factual fiction” (cf. Thompson 2011: 28), stemming, as we are told on the front cover of the book, from the British author’s direct experience: “The stories are based on fact. Spooky, but true”. Ormsby, who no longer travels to but lives in Romania, is the main character and narrator of his stories, and the journey to which he invites his readers is one into the people’s minds, into deep-rooted mentalities, and what he regards as idiosyncratic cultural behaviour. “Close your guidebook and meet the people”, says the gaudily coloured cover of the first edition.

⁶ In fact, Arghir, the translator, worked in collaboration with the author for the translation of the book.

⁷ As Thompson notices, “The boundaries of the travel writing genre are [...] fuzzy, rather than firmly fixed: what we class as travel writing, and what we exclude from the genre, are perennially matters of debate, and may vary according to the questions we bring to bear on the genre” (2011: 12).

Ormsby's book addresses both foreign and Romanian readers, and the simultaneous publication of the English text and its translation testifies to a deliberate project in this direction. There is also an extremely well-developed coverage of both books on the Internet; at the same time, the short-stories have wikipedia entries and readers' forums both in English and Romanian languages with the author participating in the conversations. Message exchanges were particularly dynamic between 2008-2014. The book (in either language) was reviewed in (on-line or printed) newspapers, on the readers' blogs and discussed by the writer on his own homepage. It is quite clear that Ormsby made every possible effort to get as broad an audience as possible and that he thoroughly enjoys being in touch with his readers.

In his travel book the author operates a selection of a number of significant aspects from the huge diversity of people and places that is called Romania, in accordance with his own preferences and (moral) concerns. In more concrete ways, his cultural translation of the country for foreign readers comprises strategies of foreignization and "otherisation". Irrespective of the relationship between the "real" person Ormsby and the Romanians he gets in touch with, his fictitious counterpart always keeps an ethical distance from the observed ones. Each short-story is an encounter intended to reveal some surprising and unexpected behaviour –in terms of Western standards– that stirs the author's directly expressed or implied disapproval (sometimes facts speak for themselves). Ormsby's "slice of Romania" is populated by taxi drivers, nouveau riches, lawyers, notaries, doctors, waiters, friends, politicians, Gypsies, etc. Whether he writes in a more cheerful or in an ironic tone of voice, the writer always feels baffled at the end of the story and wishes to trigger a similar reaction on his readers' side. As is shown in the book presentation (e.g. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Never_Mind_the_Balkans,_Here%27s_Romania), his matters of concern are: "new wealth; poverty; bureaucracy; civil society; self-interest; compassion; authority; manners; petty corruption; the remnants of the *communist* mindset; child-care; road safety; animal welfare; ethnic minorities; gender issues; baptism and funeral rites". The mental and physical landscape of Romania was perceived as unmistakably oriental in 2007, when the book was published, and the country had just joined the European Union. In a deliberately simplified interpretation, the British writer's ethical project was thus to expose, through otherization and ethical distancing, "wrong" mentalities and behaviors to an international audience and to Romanians themselves, in the hope of hastening, in this way, the "Europeanization" or, rather, Westernization of the country.

As James Duncan and Derek Gregory argue (1999: 1), "representations often reveal more about the culture of the author than that of the people and places represented" and, indeed, in *Never Mind the Balkans* the author's own culture is the yardstick against which divergent opinions are evaluated.

The "translation unit" for this cultural translation is, one again, the snapshot, the cliché, the caricature of aspects that suit the author's moral and political agenda. Risky generalizations, such as the ones generated by communication based on ethnic clichés may create serious misunderstandings in intercultural communication sending us even farther from Europe than the author intended. An American reader of the book (Jackie, February 2013) provides the following on-line feedback to Ormsby [<http://mikeormsby.net/my-books/>]:

Many things remind me of China 1994-2008, cruelty to animals included [...] Just to let you know that one could tell most of these stories with a Chinese backdrop (I am a trained sinologist, fluent in mandarin), and they would ring just as true.

Vlad Arghir's translation into Romanian was highly praised by both Ormsby and the Romanian readers. In the *Acknowledgements* Arghir is thanked for his "poet's pursuit for *le mot juste*". What seems to be particularly enjoyable about the translation is the "naturalness

and idiomatic quality of the Romanian language, the result of a close cooperation between author and translator”, says a Romanian reader whose blog name is Wilkins Micawber. [<http://ce-am-mai-citit.blogspot.ro/2010/04/mike-ormsby-grand-bazar-romania-sau.html>].

In a very concise translator’s note posted on goodreads [<http://www.goodreads.com>] the translator contextualizes the publication of the book back in 2008: globalization, interest in the internet to the detriment of literature and the emergence of travel books about Romania in “which we rediscover our true nature of Phanariots [i.e. our true Oriental nature]”. This final ethnic image may well explain Arghir’s concern to preserve, even augment, the Orientalization of Romania in the translation of the book, starting from the very title. *Gran Bazar Romania. Călător strain updated* [*Gran Bazar Romania. Foreign traveler: updated*] locates us either further East in Istanbul or, on the contrary, through the English word *updated*, in the West, in the globalized world of the Internet. The translator’s constant use of the strategy of domestication –which accounts for the naturalness of the Romanian language– implies the use of *hyperbolization* (a highly fashionable translation norm in Romania today).

Hyperbolization / exaggeration is achieved through a high number of idiomatic words, phrases or emphatic constructions, that are less marked or not marked at all in the ST. This also means that in the translation the register is occasionally even more colloquial and the language more colorful than in the ST. The ultimate result of the consistent use of this strategy is a higher accumulation of offensive images of the country, funnier or, occasionally, even more surrealistic than in the ST in order for the translator to make sure that the readers don’t miss the point.

Examples:

The weather *has a bite to it* (2008:13).

[Back translation]: *horrible* weather (vreme mizerabilă) (2008: 11).

“Don’t you have insurance?” *asks* the husband (2008:16).

[Back translation]: “Don’t you have insurance?” *shouts* the husband (2008:14).

“...you Europeans *are stupid*.” [...] “Why is that?” “Because you stick to the speed limit even when there are no cops around” (2008: 17).

[Back translation]: “...you Europeans are *kind of stupid* [...] “*You don’t say so!* Why is that?” “*Why?* Because you don’t exceed the speed limit even when there are no cops around” (2008: 15).

the *big* lady (2008: 22) –*the mountain woman*– (2008: 20).

The book has triggered mixed reactions if we were to look at the average readers’ dialogues on forums and at the specialized readers’ reviews in printed or on-line newspapers and magazines. They range from a total admiration for the author’s humor, irony, keen sense of observation –a perspective which misses the moral purpose of the story– to sadness and embarrassment expressed in an apologetic tone of voice, and to self-stigmatization. In comparatively rarer cases are Romanian readers disappointed with the author, whose biased selection of people and events left little room (if any) for more pleasant aspects of the country and its inhabitants. As for a more direct ethical impact, there is no direct reference, on the readers’ side, to a possible change in the “European / Western” direction to which the book invites: after all, passivity and resignation, two ethnic clichés which are present in the stories seem to be confirmed by the readers’ response.

Conclusions

By translating travel books on a particular socio-cultural space for that particular socio-cultural space (as was the case with the two travel writings discussed here), translators reverse the conventions of the travel genre: instead of finding out more about the other, readers find out more about themselves, and are invited to reconstruct themselves as partners in intercultural and global communication.

Irrespective of the authors' own ideological agenda, the ethical values of translations of "fractal" travel writings reside in the additional ideological dimensions that (Romanian) readers are prepared to assign to these travelogues as well as in the extent to which they are ready to internalize this ideology, and translate it into both cultural and inter-cultural behaviour.

The specific purpose in translating such books should be not so much to satisfy the readers' curiosity about how they, as actual subjects of the travellers' investigations, have been stereotyped, although curiosity cannot and should not be completely erased from the equation. Such an enterprise should mainly encourage the readers' critical distancing from simplifying clichés and a better mediation of their cultural identity. Translators may play a major role in achieving such ethical projects. Their task consists in consistently applying a translation strategy that I have called elsewhere (Dimitriu 2012), echoing Venuti (1995), one of *further foreignization*. It implies processes of distancing readers, through foreignizing strategies, from the familiar people and places (Romania and Romanians, in our case) that were already translated as "foreign" by the Western narrators for their home cultures. In the case studies discussed in this paper (further) foreignization as a strategy was only sporadically present in the translation of Kaplan's book and virtually absent from Ormsby's *Grand Bazar*, where the translator's policy was, on the contrary, one of complete domestication, as his wish was to make the ST immediately accessible to the Romanian readers. Whereas it would be unrealistic to assume that the consistent use of further foreignization would totally prevent processes of self-identification, its use may, nevertheless, help the (Romanian) readers involved to better observe their cultural representation and organise a kind of response.

In more concrete terms, practising further foreignization would imply preserving in the text all the explanations and paraphrases of Romanian cultural terms and "realia," in general, that the foreign author provides rather than eliminating them from the texts in the way in which Romanian translators have oftentimes done. Paraphrase, for instance, which is a domesticating strategy of explanation for the travel narrator, could thus become a foreignizing one for the translator, as it distances the readers from culturally familiar objects, making them reflect on those elements that are regarded as different by the foreign travellers.

Similarly, the incorporation of all the misspellings of local names in the ST (if present) which translators tend to "correct" for their readers may also testify to distorted foreign perception of source culture realities. Moreover, cultural distancing would imply the translator's interference in preserving, through a kind of typographical emphasis (capitals, bolds, italics, inverted commas), all the stretches of the natives' [Romanians'] language that are present in the ST so as to highlight the fact that they are, like everything else, part of the original author's discourse and therefore should be read as "different" and "exotic".

This formative exercise could also lead to a "relativization" of the Western perspective from which these books were written, reminding readers that geography is an interpretive construct. Obviously, if the trips to Romania had been undertaken by "Eastern" travellers, their cultural filtering of the country would have been entirely different. Through further foreignization the target readers would (hopefully and gradually) give up their unproductive, "small peripheral culture" inferiority complex and de-hegemonise their inter-cultural relations. However, even if readers should question (instead of uncritically submit to) and bracket (i. e. see through essentialist tendencies), Western perceptions, this does not mean that they should ignore or disregard the clichés which have been projected on their cultural

behaviour. In fact, the tensions that could be noticed between the various kinds of responses that Romanians provided on the Internet forums (particularly to Ormsby's books) suggest that they still have uncertainties about who they are.

By keeping further foreignization as the main strategy for their discourse, translators would make no concessions for their readers in terms of toning down negative perceptions – but then, neither would they need to hyperbolize them. Its use would make the authors' travels “epistemic” (Cronin 2000: 37), as the readers would not only “see,” but also, and more importantly, they would reflect on what they see, and make decisions on their cultural identity and behaviour accordingly.

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