Back in Time Travel(s): Translating Mircea Cărtărescu's *Nostalgia*

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Considering translation as a widely intercultural phenomenon and starting from the assumption that "every story is a travel story" (Certeau, 1984), this paper aims to explore how Julian Semilian's English version of Mircea Cărtărescu's *Nostalgia* responds to the great challenge of rendering the elusive atmosphere of a Bucharest which is recreated – almost alchemically generated – by memory. Therefore, by analysing translation as both a spatial and a socio-cultural phenomenon, this paper investigates the process of translating a city from a twofold perspective. On the one hand, it reveals the author's perspective – it explores the time and place of the novel's production, since Mircea Cărtărescu succeeds in "providing us with the clearest approximation of the interior lives of those living in that city through the darkest days of the Ceaușescu regime" (McGonigle, 2005). On the other hand, it is a means of reactivating the translator's socio-cultural background – *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1986) – as Semilian recovers, through translation, the Bucharest of his own childhood, magically transformed by the book's author and modulated by the passage of time.

Keywords: translation; travel; identity; habitus; migration; mobility; globalization.

Since "every story is a travel story" (Certeau, 1984), *translation* and *travel* share a number of similarities, both being spatial and socio-cultural phenomena that facilitate communication across cultures. Thus, James Clifford, a specialist in cultural ethnography, assimilates the notion of travel to a 'translation term', pointing to the overlap between the geographical and linguistic movements involved (1997: 39). Furthermore, Dirk Delabastita and Rainier Grutman bring together the terms 'translation' and 'travel', arguing that translation has come to serve as the perfect example of the human condition in the context of globalisation and positing that in the present-day 'centreless' society, translation illustrates "the human search of self and belonging in a puzzling world full of change and difference" (Deleabastita & Grutman, 2009: 111). Or, as Papastergiadis (2000) points out, all these phenomena have led to the reconsideration of notions connected to identity and belonging, and have brought to the fore the existence and importance of asymmetrical power relationships.

Following the same line of argument, and discussing about the relationship established between translation and travel, Susan Bassnett reveals the fact that both disciplines have been concerned with the way in which the images of the foreign are constructed (1993: 2002). As Loredana Polezzi also argues, translation is conceived as a way in which the foreign is configured and illustrated in the receptor culture, while travel is seen as a "movement across languages" (Polezzi, 2009: 173). From this stance, Bassnett points out that increased attention has been shown to the way in which the images of the foreign/ difference are reflected within the Western cultures, although this is not an exclusive direction. Nevertheless, the present paper will focus particularly on the way in which the image of Romania is constructed for the Western audience, through the

translation of *Nostalgia* into English. More precisely, the link between translation and travel will be analysed here as an expression of the subjective, personal experience of the translator, an identity quest, a journey through the mind. Consequently, this link between translation and travel will be discussed as a means of tracing back memory and recreating the atmosphere of a Bucharest which is transformed alchemically by the author himself and by the translator also, both of them partially sharing the same socio-cultural background, the same *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1995). This sort of travelling through the mind is not necessarily associated with the translation of 'the other', but rather with the translation of 'the self'.

Moreover, discussing translation as an intercultural phenomenon, the practice is conceived as a tool that facilitates communication and is closely connected to notions of place, mobility and migration. From this perspective, Susan Bassnett (1993) shows that, by means of translation, a threefold link is drawn at linguistic, spatial and temporal level, a threefold perspective that will be explored in the present paper. Therefore, it can be argued that, in the context of globalization, both travel and translation have acquired increased importance, and have led to the ever-growing strengthening of the international position occupied by the English language. Within this context, various forms of mobility have emerged, and, as such, growing attention has been relegated to the notion of 'travel', adapted to include a variety of different perspectives, from economic migration to mass tourism, diaspora, exile, or even "gendered and class-related perspectives" (Bassnett, 2002: 237).

Therefore, in the most developed countries, starting with the second half of the 20th century, migration and cross-border mobility were accompanied by an increase in the number of books translated, especially from English. For small countries and peripheral language groups, international communication thus became very much one-way traffic, and this was also the case of Romania, perceived as a minor country, occupying a peripheral position within the literary polysystem – which, it can be argued, very much influenced the translations from Romanian into other languages. Before the 1990s, and especially during the communist years, most Romanian authors (such as Mihail Sadoveanu, Zaharia Stancu, Marin Preda, Marin Sorescu, Nichita Stănescu and others) took advantage of the contacts established with the countries sharing the same political system, and their works were published in the Soviet Union, Poland, Hungary and other states of the socialist camp, while much fewer Romanian writers were published in the West. However, starting with the second half of the 20th century, and particularly after the fall of the communist regime, the direction of the translations has somehow changed from the East to the West. This was also the case of Mircea Cărtărescu, as "[l]ike most of his literary contemporaries of the avant-garde Eighties Generation, his major work has been translated into several European languages, with the notable exception, until 2005, of English" (Codrescu, 2005: ix).

The 2005 translation of Cărtărescu's *Nostalgia*, published in the United States, was carried out by Julian Semilian and published by New Directions. And yet, in the case of *Nostalgia*, the direction is rather from West to East. The translator is a poet, a novelist and a filmmaker, born in Romania and presently teaching film editing and serving as the Chair of the Editing and Sound Department at the North Carolina School of Filmmaking; he is a member of PEN America and translator of several other Romanian authors besides Mircea Cărtărescu.

Claiming that "*Nostalgia* called out to be translated", Julian Semilian first started translating Cărtărescu out of whim, beginning with a short fragment of *Orbitor*, but this was in fact a sort of coming back to his Romanian origins and discovering the strange easiness of swinging between the two languages. "I felt that the very words were trying to say themselves into English, and it was strange and delightful to help them along", says Semilian in the Afterword to *Nostalgia*, "as if they were benefiting from an opening when the linguistic border guards were absent" (Semilian, 2005: 317).

The relationship between translation and travel points to another important issue, namely the fact that both practices have contributed to the creation and preservation of stereotypes. Thus, as Cronin (1995) points out, this phenomenon occurs in particular in the case of "minor cultures"

attempting to assert themselves in the linguistic domains of much more prestigious cultures. Cronin also explains that these stereotypes can even end up taking the form of "auto-stereotypes", that is self-representations of a particular cultural group. This is why studies on travel and translation both bring to the fore the prominent role that translators and travellers play in constructing images of the foreign in the receptor culture.

Similarly to the traveller's account of a particular place, story or culture, the translator's account contributes to the creation of a certain image, and, hence, it is likely to function as a marketing tool, which can be used to promote the image of the source culture. Therefore, from this point of view, the representation phenomenon can no longer be illustrated as a mere system of binary oppositions (self vs. other, subject vs. object, source vs. target, or observed vs. observee), but as part of a "more complex web of travelling images and multiple refractions which often involve several layers of writing, rewriting and translation" (Polezzi, 2009: 174).

Commenting upon *Nostalgia* and Mircea Cărtărescu's writing within the international landscape, Thomas McGonigle also highlights the power literature has in shaping cultural identities:

> Dublin did not really exist until the publication of Joyce's Ulysses, Norway was a dim country assigned to the Vikings until Knut Hamsun published Hunger and Portugal was finally revealed to readers with Fernando Pessoa's Book of Disquietude. Similarly, Nostalgia gives the clearest approximation of the interior lives of those living in Bucharest through the darkest days of Ceaușescu's regime. (2007)

On the other hand, since this identity is described through the eyes of the traveller, of the translator, in this case, the translation could give rise to biased cultural representations, to a stereotypical image of what the reader is expected to see, or read.

Similarly, Christian Moraru (2006) sees another facet of this cultural dimension, warning about the danger of the new post-colonialism; he argues that, before stepping the borders into a vaster ensemble, one should first do away with the inherited national self-representations and the traditional paradigms lasting long after the official fall of communism. He states that

> (…) in the postcommunist era, the ongoing hegemony of the nationalist model and East-European ethnic strife, in particular, have consolidated in the West a set of assumptions about what the East-European writer should be like. [...] East-European lands and people are seen as completely determined by past and present history, hence spatially and culturally outside "true", forward-moving Europe, expected as they are to convey their "uniqueness" form a position of radical alterity, necessarily "bearing witness" to communist-era unspeakable pain and so forth. (Moraru 2006: 42)

These assumptions can create clichés and presumptions that distort the Western representations of Eastern Europe; additionally, the East European identity and, more precisely, the Romanian identity still continues to be weighted in terms of touristic expectations. Moraru claims that "Eastern Europe and East-Europeans are one big freak show", further referring to "former communist countries' literatures as a cultural safari" (43).

American writer and translator Jean Harris (2008) describes Romanians as open and friendly in social situations, remarking the Romanians' marked tendency "both to make [themselves] known and to say to whom [they] belong (down to grandparents and even before that), and this predilection combines with a tendency to recollect, out loud, a lot". She goes on explaining that "you can learn all about somebody in the first five minutes, and routine disclosures are also expected of you. Tale telling is a prominent feature of social life, and this is true in the domain of Senator, cab driver and peasant". Finally, Harris proclaims Romania as the world capital of stories.

Without being ascribed to the category of stories as such, or to that of travel writing, the literary work chosen as a case in point for the present analysis tells the story of an important period

in the history of Romania. Published in 1989[1] (the last year of the Communist Regime in Romania), *Nostalgia* bears witness to the realities of the time and place of its production. According to Codrescu,

> Cărtărescu wrote this book during the censorious days of Ceausescu's dictatorship and, to an ideologically conscientious reader, some of the outlandish images could pass for political outrage. I sensed, here and there, the literal dankness of basements and Kafkaesques torture chambers of the regime, and there is definitely enough dust and mud to put one in the mind of the endless socialist construction projects that made life so dreary and cold for adults. (2005: xii)

As Codrescu argues in the excerpt above, the text is full of hints and allusions to the Romanian life in the late 1980s. It is a journey through time to the dark ages of communist Romania, a journey likely to stir the interest of both the 'conscientious' Romanian reader – sensitive to a common past full of memories –, as well as of a foreign audience, curious at least to learn more about a nation still hovering in Ceausescu's shadow. The action is set in Bucharest, "a Bucharest transformed alchemically", as translator Julian Semilian (2005: 317) explains, a Bucharest evoked

> (…) with its mists of ancient homes with tiles and transoms, with skylights and massive oak doors, and further in the distance large and ashen buildings teeming with windows, the downtown skyscraper with the Gallus billboard like a bluish globe above it, the Victoria department store, the fire watchtower to the left, the arching buildings on Stefan cel Mare Boulevard, and off in the beyond, the hydro-electric plant, with its immense chimneys splitting out twisted stands of steam. (Cărtărescu, 2005: 36)

Thomas McGonigle argues that "though it is unlikely that one could rebuild the physical reality of Bucharest based on Mircea Cărtărescu's *Nostalgia* [...] Cărtărescu has provided us with the clearest approximation of the interior lives of those living in that city through the darkest days of the Ceauşescu regime". Moreover, McGonigle notices that, "composed during that time and finally published in 1989, the novel is a timeless invitation to dream and embrace the comforting power of personal memory, the only sure bulwark against the effects of totalitarian control" (McGonigle, 2005).

We could thus argue that this (quasi)coincidence between the time and place of production and the setting of the novel results in a novel incorporating (explicitly or in a rather covert way) various aspects of the Romanian lifestyle during the last years of the regime, which may have constituted other challenges for the translator. Cărtărescu does not aim to describe the external reality, but reality as perceived through his own eyes. He becomes thus a sort of "structural wizard, who builds his stories with the innate skill of a medieval puppeteer, with deft lingering in foreplay, in digression, in excuses to the reader for what's to follow, in delighted and perverse apologia, all of which serve to bring interest to a pitch" (Codrescu, 2005: xii). This makes, most definitely, the task for the translator even more difficult.

Since the translator himself bears the legacy of the same past, vacillating between 'domesticating' or 'foreignizing' the source text is even more prominent. The strategies of 'domestication' and 'foregnization' are defined by Venuti as two distinct tools that enable the translator either to bring the foreign text to the readers and give them the illusion of reading an original text (domestication), or to preserve the difference (foreignization) and show the foreign reader the specificities of the source culture (see Venuti, 1995: 204). A case in point is the above excerpt of "Mentardy", which provides the image of the Bucharest of the communist days, as seen through

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[5] A first edition of this book, censured and entitled *Visul* (The Dream) was published in 1989 by Cartea Românească publishing house.

the eyes of the writer, who recalls "panorama Bucureştiului, încremenită sub nori, cu pîlcul de case vechi, cu olane şi oberlichturi, cu luminatoare şi uşi de stejar masiv, iar mai încolo nişte *construcţii mari şi cenuşii, cu multe geamuri*, blocul din centru cu *reclama Gallus* ca un glob albastru deasupra, magazinul Victoria, spre stînga Foişorul de Foc" (Cărtărescu, 1993: 70; our italics). In the example above, the structure "construcţii mari şi cenuşii, cu multe geamuri", which is full of meaning for the Romanian reader, is skilfully rendered by "ashen buildings teeming with windows" in an attempt to render the nuances intended by the author. On the other hand, the structure "reclama Gallus" is rendered without any explicitation by the "Gallus billboard" which almost remains covert even to a contemporary Romanian reader. On the other hand, in a more domesticating vein, Foişorul de Foc, a symbol of the Bucharest of those days, is plainly rendered by the "fire watchtower", and even spelled in lowercase, accompanying the foreign reader in his/her imaginary journey through Bucharest. Moreover, it is worth remarking at this point that, through the topic of the novel itself, the translation constructs an image of Romania that is likely to fuel the stereotypes already engraved in the western mind. The book creates an image of difference which meets the expectancies of the foreign reader.

Therefore, if we were to situate the idea of travel on a temporal axis, translating *Nostalgia* reactivated for Semilian a socio-cultural background, Bourdieu's *habitus*, recovering through translation the Bucharest of his childhood, transformed alchemically on the one hand by Cărtărescu himself, and, on the other, by time. Bourdieu describes habitus as "a durable transposable system of definitions" (1977: 134) which are acquired by the young child within his family, environment, and it is the result of the practices (be them conscious or unconscious) experienced therein. As shown by Bourdieu, *habitus* emerges from a dialogue established between the family legacy, ethnic, class-based and collective habitus, and it shapes the individual within society. "Translating *Nostalgia*, I felt that I recovered Bucharest, which I'd left in adolescence, but it was a Bucharest transformed alchemically by Mircea: 'I found myself,' he wrote in a recent book of essays, *Forever Young, Swaddled in Pixels*, "the writer who generated it... a plastic, proteiform city which my imagination shaped according to its will..." (Semilian, 2007: 13).

It is clearly a journey through the mind, through the past, an identity quest underwent both by the author and by the translator. Furthermore, in "Notes on Translating *Nostalgia* by Mircea Cărtărescu", Julian Semilian – the translator traveller – speaks about his personal experience in translating this book

> When *Nostalgia* [...] called out to be translated, there were messengers, certainly, and they informed me I was chosen to smuggle it, *Nostalgia*, into the future, across borders, through languages. Granted asylum within the book's territory, word by word, word-by-word exchanges take place. [...] I know that the book crossed through me: thinking about it now, two years later, I feel trepidation, a pleasant invasion, thrilling in shape-shifting words, in mutual agreements and invisible nods. The memory of the book still stirs in me, and I in it, and my being a participant in the book, it alive within me. (2007: 13)

The translator's *habitus*, his bilingual background greatly facilitated the translation of some children's rhymes. Children's language is filled with phrases and idioms which are skilfully dealt with and rendered by corresponding phrases: *îi căra în cap un număr cuvenit de "castane"* (*she knuckle-cuffed his head an agreed-upon number of times*), *se dădea mare* (*acted above his station*), *şi-a dat arama pe faţă* (*the cat was out of the bag*), *nu-l putea duce mintea* (*he couldn't come up with anything more imaginative*), *să-l caftim* (*Let's rough him up*), *nu e de nasul vostru* (*off-limits to snot-face kids like you*), *ne-am pomenit cu ele în coastă* (*we found ourselves looking at them*).

Moreover, since this part of the story – "Mentardy" – is sometimes told through the eyes of the child-author, the very act of translation is no longer associated with the process of translating the 'other'. It is rather a way of translating the 'self', as Semilian himself puts together pieces of a puzzle of his own past and recollections of the old Bucharest.

Era o lume nouă şi plină de ascunzişuri, murdară şi ciudată, pe care noi, vreo şapte-opt băieţi între cinci şi doisprezece ani, o luam în fiecare dimineaţă în stăpînire şi cercetare, înarmaţi cu pistoale cu apă, de doi lei, pe care le cumpăram, albastre şi roze, de la „Scufiţa Roşie", magazinul de jucării care exista pe atunci la Obor, Oborul vechi, adevărat, şi în care mirosea întotdeauna a petrosin. (Cărtărescu, 1993: 60)

It was a new world, strange and dirty, full of places to hide; and we, seven or eight boys, aged between five and twelve, armed with blue and pink water pistols we bought for two lei at Little Red Riding Hood, the toy store at that time in the Obor district, became every morning its masters and explorers. That was the old Obor, the true one, where it always smelled of turpentine. (Cărtărescu, 2005: 31-32).

Under the same factor of time travelling, we could also include allusions and references to the communist regime in Romania, which, although transparent, in Codrescu's words, "to the ideologically conscientious reader" (i.e. most of the times Romanian), can remain covert to the target language reader: *balcoanele cu murături* (*pickle-jar-filled balconies*), *steguleţe roşii şi tricolore de hîrtie de la defilare* (*tiny red and tricolor paper flags from the parade*) or the already mentioned *reclama Gallus* (*the Gallus billboard*). Moreover, the occasionally ironic tone of the narrator (signalled, for instance, by the inverted commas used for: *emisiunile de 'popularizare ştiinţifică' Roza vînturilor la radio şi Teleenciclopedia la televizor*) is sometimes lost in translation (*popular science programs, such as the Rose of the Wind on the radio and Tele-Encyclopedia on television*).

This points out once again the close connection between translation and travel, both being ways through which images of the foreign can be constructed – in a more or less faithful way – in the receptor culture. It is a subjective view of the teller, who internalizes the source culture and provides a more or less objective account of it.

Instead of a conclusion, I would like to emphasise, once again, the power translation and travel have in creating and preserving stereotypes and, more importantly, the extent to which stereotypes are preserved in translation. Clearly, the translation on Cărtărescu's *Nostalgia* contributes to depicting the image of Romania as it used to be in the dark ages of the communist regime. Moreover, a somehow stereotypical view can be perceived even in the translator's own words regarding his recovered Romanian experience:

The summer of 2004 I returned to the United States from a two-week trip to my childhood city, Bucharest. The suspicious customs man inquired: "What could anyone be doing in a country like Romania for two weeks?" I stared blankly at him. It was a good question.

The customs man must have thought I didn't hear him, so he tried again: "What could anyone be doing in a country like Romania for two weeks?" "Nostalgia," I answered and smiled. "Nostalgia". It must have been the right answer, because he waved me through." (Semilian, 2005: 317)

In addition, the translator's afterword illustrates, somehow consonant with Delabastita & Grutman's view (2005: 111), the very essence of the common ground reached by translation and travel, namely the human quest for self and a sense of belonging, the search for one's roots.

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