

# STEINAR LONE AND THE MAGIC OF TRANSLATION

*Crina Leon*

Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iași, Email: crina\_laurentiu@yahoo.no

## **Acknowledgements**

The publication of this paper is supported by EEA Grants, contract no 4/22.07.2014.

Steinar Lone is a literary translator and a non-fiction writer, a member of the Norwegian Association of Literary Translators and of the Norwegian Non-Fiction Writers and Translators Organization. He has translated Romanian literature into Norwegian for 22 years, starting in 1993 with Mircea Eliade's *On Mântuleasa Street*. He has translated Mihail Sadoveanu's *The Hatchet*, Camil Petrescu's *The Procrustean Bed*, as well as the *Blinding* trilogy, *Nostalgia*, *Travesti*, *Why We Love Women* and *Europe has the shape of my brain* by Mircea Cărtărescu. For his translation of *Blinding. The Left Wing* he was awarded the Norwegian Critics Prize for Literature in the year 2009. Steinar Lone has also translated poetry such as *Vasco Da Gama* by Gellu Naum. More recent or near future translations include *I'm a Communist Biddy* by Dan Lungu, *The Book of Whispers* by Varujan Vosgianian and *Little Fingers* by Filip Florian. As a fiction translator, he has been awarded a state scholarship for 3 years in 2015, which will allow him to continue translating Romanian literature into Norwegian.

Steinar Lone este traducător literar și scriitor de non-ficțiune, membru al Asociației norvegiene a traducătorilor literari și al Organizației norvegiene a scriitorilor și traducătorilor de non-ficțiune. Traduce literatură română în limba norvegiană de 22 de ani, începând cu nuvela *Pe strada*

*Mântuleasa* de Mircea Eliade în anul 1993. A tradus *Baltagul* de Mihail Sadoveanu, *Patul lui Procust* de Camil Petrescu, precum și trilogia *Orbitor* alături de *Nostalgia*, *Travesti*, *De ce iubim femeile* și *Europa are forma creierului meu* de Mircea Cărtărescu. Pentru traducerea operei *Orbitor. Aripa stângă* i-a fost acordat Premiul Criticilor Norvegieni pentru Literatură în anul 2009. Steinar Lone a tradus, de asemenea, poezie precum *Vasco da Gama* de Gellu Naum. Traduceri mai recente sau care vor apărea în viitorul apropiat includ *Sînt o babă comunistă!* de Dan Lungu, *Cartea șoptelor* de Varujan Vosganian și *Degete mici* de Filip Florian. Ca traducător de ficțiune, i-a fost acordată în anul 2015 o bursă de stat pentru o perioadă de 3 ani, care îi va permite să continue să traducă literatură română în limba norvegiană.



Photo: Crina Leon

**You speak Romanian so well, you know so many things about the country that you could easily be taken for a Romanian. How connected do you feel with Romania? How do you maintain the contact with the country?**

My contact with Romania has varied a lot over the years. This has depended partly on the situation in the country, partly on my own working situation. I went there fairly regularly as a student,

spending the university year of 1978-79 there. But after a visit in 1984, I did not feel like going back for a while. And getting news and keeping in touch was difficult at the time. Also, my working situation did not allow me to go there very often: then I was not working with Romanian, or any other of my Romance languages. After the fall of communism, I was back a couple of times during the 1990s, but again, I was working in other areas. Only after 2000, when I became a full-time freelance literary translator, have I had the opportunity of going regularly.

A lot of my impressions from Romania are from the communist time. Every time I come here, I feel like an emigrant who has come back after several years abroad: I have different connotations, different experiences. A lot of these are not even shared by my own generation -- they have forgotten! And certainly not by the new generations. So I quickly have to adapt to the changes that have occurred -- in language, in daily life and in how to communicate, to mention just some aspects.

After 2007, I have come to Romania almost every year, sometimes for special events, sometimes just for travelling around. I have extended my network tremendously. One of my problems was that before 1990, I did not manage to make that many friends or contacts -- and a lot of those from that time are not around anymore. But the seminars organized by the Romanian Cultural Institute, until some years ago, were extremely helpful. Also, just going to the International Festival of Literature and Translation (FILIT) in Iași in 2013 and 2014, gave me an opportunity to meet a lot of people.

But perhaps the most important thing is, of course, the Internet and the social media. I am updated just as easily as if I were in Romania -- and I think that about two thirds of my news "feed" on one of these networks are in Romanian, which is also good for my language practice.

Indeed, I must pay attention not to live completely in a Romanian cyber world. As a translator, I must also know my own language and culture...

**How difficult was it to publish your first translations from Romanian, for instance *Baltagul (The Hatchet)* by Mihail Sadoveanu?**

Very difficult. I had read the book in 1979, and when I came back to Norway, I translated the first and the last chapter and went to a publishing company. They laughed at me at the reception! But they accepted the envelope with the introductory note and the two chapters, and wrote to me a polite letter of refusal after a couple of weeks. Times were difficult, there are so many books... That's what they always say!

So I went to another, smaller publisher, where there was a very enthusiastic editor at the time. And through a complicated process, my first translation turned out to be Mircea Eliade, with *On the Mântuleasa Street*, in 1993. But I had not forgotten *The Hatchet*, and mentioned to someone at the Romanian embassy in Oslo that I had translated parts of it. So the embassy talked to the original publishing company again, and convinced them. Also, at that time, there were some library subsidies available, to encourage publishers to do more with literature from not often translated languages.

**How often do you choose the books to translate and how often do they choose you?**

For Romanian titles, I choose them myself, mostly. Eliade was originally proposed by the publisher, as well as some poems by Gellu Naum. I also have to take into account the fact that the readers (the market) are mainly interested in contemporary writers. So *The Hatchet* was a kind of a miracle. The same goes for my translation of Camil Petrescu's *The Procrustean Bed*. I am immensely proud of the fact that I managed to find a publisher for my Norwegian translation. Not to mention that the reviewers almost unanimously agreed that it was a great novel.

**Could you give us some examples of Romanian words which troubled you in the process of translation?**

Some of the words you find in Mircea Cărtărescu's books will be difficult even for native speakers... There seem to be some old-

fashioned ideas in some Romanian circles that only Romanians can properly understand -- and translate from! -- Romanian. And yes, of course there is one theory of translation that states that translation is impossible. A theory with good arguments, but not very useful. -- Any language can be translated into any other language, but that does not necessarily mean that all ideas and connotations can be carried over seamlessly. Pardon my French, but the Romanian word *bozgor* -- a pejorative word for "Hungarian" -- does not have any Norwegian correspondent. In Norwegian, we have a slightly pejorative, though more jocular word for the Swedes -- "söta bror" -- "the sweet brother". Which would be tricky to render in Romanian. So unless you start putting in footnotes, there is always an inevitable loss in translation.

One word that I have not yet had to translate is *beizadea*. A wonderful word, a Turkism used for the son or sons of the reigning princes of Moldova and Wallachia. Since the title of prince was not hereditary, they were not crown princes. So how to translate it? Even more telling, though the dictionaries will classify the word as obsolete, it pops up in modern newspaper articles, to mean the sons (mostly) of former communist dignitaries now taking power. In reports from China these days, we read about the second generation there, the "princelings". I bet there is a Chinese word for that, and Romanian certainly has one!

**How important is it for you to meet other translators of Romanian literature and on what occasions do you manage to meet? Who are your best friends in this field and how did you meet them?**

A lot of translators sit in their ivory tower, in front of a computer screen, and it is often a lonely task. So meeting colleagues is even more important for us than for ordinary mortals who go to a workplace and meet other people every day. Now, in my case, for several years much of my contact with Romania was through my former room-mate in the student home of Grozăvești, Jan Willem Bos from the Netherlands. After more than 35 years, he is still one of my best friends. There is a long story here and he has told parts of it in his book about his Securitate file, published both in Dutch and Romanian.

And since Scandinavians always hang together and cooperate, I got to know Inger Johansson from Sweden through my translators' association.

But most important, the initiative of the Romanian Cultural Institute to organize a seminar for translators in Paris in 2008 led to the creation of a large, informal network of translators from Romanian into various other languages. And now, FILIT in Iași -- but also other events -- has partly taken over. And of course, we stay in touch through social media. In a way, it is a weird club -- the common language is, of course, Romanian. On one occasion, we were gathered at the Romanian Cultural Institute in Venice for a workshop, and one evening, four of us were out having dinner at a restaurant next to a canal. It cannot be more Venetian -- or Italian. And I did not mind, since I also translate from, and speak, Italian. But the company this evening consisted of Laure Hinckel from France, Gerhardt Csejka from Germany, though originally from the Banat in Romania, Jan Willem and myself. So when the waiter came, the Norwegian translated between Romanian and Italian for a Frenchwoman, a German and a Dutchman.

### **How did the encounter with your most recent translated books take place?**

I am still very much a paper-based reader, but I am getting known among Romanian writers, who kindly enough send me books. But I also enjoy going to bookshops -- for my last visit to Romania, I arrived with one empty suitcase! And again, social media are important, with links to various launchings, reviews etc. So I think that I have a fair overview of contemporary Romanian literature -- including some non-fiction. The problem is that once I have translated during a whole day, will I be able to read in the evening?

If you refer to the readers' reaction to my translations, I may say that Norwegian newspapers and magazines print fewer and fewer reviews. And even when times were better, not all books -- certainly not all translated books! -- were reviewed. Up to and including Cărtărescu, all my translations were reviewed -- and mostly favorably, and often in several newspapers. But my

translations from Gellu Naum (a selection of his poetry and the novel *Zenobia*) only got a note by the end of the year. An encouraging one -- "don't miss out these two titles!" -- but still. Dan Lungu's *I am a communist biddy* did not get any reviews, but we had the author here for a launching, with a lot of people coming to the event.

**You have recently received a state artist scholarship for three years, as a fiction translator. What will this scholarship mean for further promoting Romanian literature in Norway?**

It means a bigger contribution to my pension fund! But in the first place, it means that I can plod on and do not have to translate easier titles from other languages. It is also an encouragement -- it means that someone considers that what I have done with Romanian literature in Norway so far is of some value.

**Have you ever consulted the contemporary Romanian authors you were translating with a view to the meaning of different expressions?**

Certainly. Except that there are only two that are alive, Mircea Cărtărescu and Dan Lungu. But I am now translating Varujan Vosgian's *The Book of Whispers*, and I recently had to ask him about a small problem. And again, I can also consult my fellow translators. And they consult me!

**How did your life change while translating Mircea Cărtărescu's *Blinding*? What impressed you most in this book?**

I must have spent about four years with *Blinding*, though I also translated other titles and had other tasks in-between. But I have the feeling that I lived inside the author's head for four years, and that I still have not recovered.

And what impressed me most? Already when I read some of the stories in *Nostalgia*, I was struck by how similar our childhoods were -- we are the same generation -- in spite of the fact that Romania in the late fifties and early sixties certainly was very different from Norway at the same time. But when I had finished the whole trilogy,

I was amazed at how things came into place -- how things obviously had been planned when he started, and everything fitted into a greater pattern. It is an extremely structured book -- though it may not seem so until you read it carefully, and perhaps several times. As one critic said, I think it was the late Professor Matei Călinescu, the book cannot be read, only re-read.

At the launching of the third and final volume at the House of Literature in Oslo in 2011, Mircea Cărtărescu said that he had to close a lot of stories at the end, stories that he had opened earlier in the book. He also said that if readers found some of the chapters uninteresting, they were free to skip some pages and find other things later in the book. As a translator, I cannot skip anything.

**Can you remember a touching meeting with one of the contemporary writers you have translated?**

That must be the launching I have just mentioned, of volume three in 2011. My parents were there, both more than ninety years old, and they followed the interview with Mircea on stage, in English. And they met him afterwards. They were also very impressed by the applause from the public when in the beginning, Mircea asked his translator to stand up. Even though I told them that the audience was packed with my fellow translators, who will use any pretext to attract attention to the fact that books do not translate themselves.

If you cannot read the original language, you must rely on a translation. Almost in the same way in which it does not help to be able to read the musical notes of, let's say, Beethoven's *Violin Concerto* -- if there is no orchestra and no violinist, your experience of the composer's genius will indeed be very limited.