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Lidia Vianu: „Any translator is both the piano and the pianist at once."

Monica Manolachi

Before compiling these questions, I read and listened to your replies from previous interviews. You are among those professors from the Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literatures, University of Bucharest, who have a strong presence in mass media, nationally and internationally, which explains the academics' constant need to communicate with the society, with other institutions, with the world that surrounds us. Nowadays, more than in the past, it is essential to know at least one foreign language, if not more. Fortunately, there are various options. You learned foreign languages from native speakers. What did you use to feel then? How was it when you bought your first TV set and watched the first movies subtitled in Romanian?

Television came to Romania when I was just a few years old. Under communism, all films had subtitles. At seven, I got lucky: my parents found a French woman who taught me French for over twelve years—grammar, literature, the works. In fourth grade, I had a Russian teacher at school, and that was nice. She made me learn declensions and conjugations by heart. I have forgotten them, but I can still remember some. I am not fluent in Russian, though. Focusing on English pushed all other languages away. Unfortunately, I only had a teacher whose mother tongue was English when I became a student of English, at 17.

You read a lot when you were a teenager. What authors are still close to your heart and why?

I would have liked to read so much more… I read my first book when I was almost four years old. It was a communist little story, "The Magic Egg". I cannot forget how indignant I felt. I was sitting in a huge armchair, by the fireplace, and I found myself reading a mass of stupid, artificial words. "If this is what reading means, I could very well do without it," I mused. Now I know that all communist literature, and only communist literature, actually, was that way, but at the time I was genuinely angry.

All the true books I have ever read have stayed with me. I liked the books I could trust. I only began enjoying books in a more intellectual way when I became a student. I was so lucky to escape the communist school system with only 11 years. Some remember primary and high school nostalgically. I hated both—I really hated them. Whatever I learned at that time had to be completely independent from communist handbooks. All my classmates tacitly rejected

indoctrination. We ignored this word, but had the very clear intuition of what it was. I couldn't wait to get back home and forget it all, read true books, not lies. The bibliographies we were asked to read in faculty, on the other hand, were fascinating. They were pretty free from censorship. It was an island. I still can't believe that we were asked to read *Brave New World* and *Areopagitica* [1644, John Milton against censorship!]. The Faculty of English was a citadel that resisted political manipulation. If we could teach our students now as we were taught, if they could now read all day and all night, avidly, as we did, and all through those long summer holidays, especially, well, we would still have an efficient weapon against illiterate thinking. But our present students read summaries on Google, and are asked to parrot ideas drowning in cultural studies for a final grade. So this is what they read—when they are not at their jobs, of course.

Before 1989, crossing the border was not as easy as today. What did you feel when you went abroad for the first time?

That was quite sad. I so much wanted to travel. I only did that once, in the summer that followed the earthquake in 1977. I was miraculously allowed to spend ten days in a Bulgarian seaside resort. I never even went to the beach. I wanted to see all the places: Sofia, Plovdiv, Balcic… I liked towns, I liked villages, I liked slums, I liked everything. It was fascinating to see churches turned into homes: an old woman lived in one. We had been warned not to swerve from the route Bucharest-Varna, but we got away with it. I suspect Bulgarian Securitate agents had their hands full with their own co-nationals.

My first true journey took place in 1991. It plunged me from the communist nightmare into the "capitalist jungle". The Iron Curtain had fallen and, for two school years, I taught as a Fulbright in New York and San Francisco. I allowed myself to be carried away by my mother's lifetime enthusiasm, "The Americans are soon coming!" Although not quite as she expected, America did her job for me: I spent all day in those stupendous University libraries. At night I would read books borrowed in the evening. How else was I going to be able to teach contemporary British literature, when my students' years had ended the 20th century with Virginia Woolf? My Fulbright grants had become synonymous with "The Americans have arrived"—my parents' fervent wish…

By the end of this year, there will have been 30 years since the Revolution. Tell us about the impact of the 1989 on teaching foreign languages. As for me, in the last three years of high school I forgot the Russian I had learned over the previous five years. Meanwhile, the Ion Creangă High School included Japanese in their curriculum. In the morning of September 11, 2001, I was happy to find out I was to study foreign languages at the university, but when I got home that evening, I saw the Twin Towers from New York burning on our TV screen. Ecstasy and agony within just several hours. What historical days would remain etched in your memory?

I am not so sure we do have a contemporary history yet. We are in a kind of political limbo. I have not seen much happening during these last 30 years. It may be my own fault, of course. I had always struggled to "cultivate my own garden", as Voltaire put it: I did what was in my power to keep communism away from my mind. I have never been a sociable person. Solitude is my way of life. I do not want to get on any bandwagon. I do not wish to be the boss, I will not join any gang. I expect this is the explanation of the distance between my inner life and the present age. Ten years ago, I founded *Contemporary Literature Press*, and I have worked on it 18 hours daily, without weekends or holidays. No TV, no papers. "Revolution" does not describe what happened here in 1989. Not to me. It was a kind of liberation, no doubt. We were suddenly free to read all books and surf the net—I am really grateful for that. But what happened on 25 December 1989 had very little to do with that freedom.

As to teaching English after 1989, it certainly went wild. And yet, the efficiency of teaching English went down dramatically. We were invaded by "communicative teaching", whose result our present students are. Romanians had such a solid tradition when it came to the teaching of foreign languages as *langue et civilisation*. Now, 30 years later, a few brave teachers are struggling awfully hard to get back there—which is impossible. A high school teacher's mind has radically changed. If they can't keep their students amused, they do not feel fulfilled—which may be right, I don't know. I myself changed the traditional lectures on literature into interactive courses. It was more fun and much more difficult to stage that intellectual strategy, but I focused on the text, and refused to use the "sacred-cow" words that literary critics often use in order to prove their superiority to the literary text.

Nowadays, most dictionaries are just one click away and we learn a lot directly from the screen, so, naturally, teaching has had to change. I wonder how ready for these changes Romanians are, how aware, how resistant, how intuitive, how creative… In 2006, you initiated the MA Programme for the Translation of the Contemporary Literary Text (MTTLC), English and Romanian, which I attended with great pleasure too. You believe that "teaching through translation works". What factors do you think favor it?

Translation is probably the only way to teach the essence of a literary text. It may be the best tool of literary criticism. In 2006, my students were so eager to grasp ideas, to put into words what they had understood. Contemporary culture is no longer focused on the depth of a thought. The contemporary mind is ubiquitous. It has achieved a prodigious dispersal of attention, so reading one book at a time has become quite impossible. We live in another world. I admit I have no idea what could touch the student today and arouse his enthusiasm. I expect I could find out, but I have so much left to do that I refuse to waste my time reinventing myself.

In 2009, you founded the Contemporary Literature Press, a part of this MA, which involves activities that allow you to show students what editorial work means. How is it different? What kind of books do you produce?

It is called "the online publishing house of the University of Bucharest for the study of the English language through its literature." That description was Professor Sandulescu's idea. He taught me so much. He is the father of the 130-volume series of *A Manual for the Advanced Study of James Joyce's Finnegans Wake*. He was one of the best Joyceans in this world. Our Joyce series has made it to the top.

We have tried a few collections. First of all, we have edited classical books as bilingual texts, sometimes in three languages at once. We have published Petronius in Romanian, English and Latin, for instance. We have published handbooks (recent and old) of English: language and literature. Older handbooks by Romanian authors have often been forgotten, so we have created a series that aims at sketching the history of English Studies in Romania. We included in it forgotten books coming from the Romanian Academy Library, books coming from older personal libraries, such as Professor Sandulescu's and mine. We have also published most of Shakespeare's plays bilingually, in very old and well-known Romanian translations.

I must admit with joy that Cultural Studies have not been a direction that we cared to follow. Debuts are few and accidental. We have focused on books that can teach English to those who read them, among other things. On the whole, we have collected around 400 volumes here: https://editura.mttlc.ro/.

From an earlier interview, with poet Ioana Ieronim, it is clear that the center of gravity of all your activities is this idea of working shoulder to shoulder with your students. How did you become aware of its value? Did you have professors who worked this way or is it a dream you had had for a long time and it eventually came true? How does it work and what are the benefits?

For ten years, the truth is the publishing house relied on the enthusiasm of our graduate students. I worked with them, they learned how to do pretty complicated things connected to publishing (confrontation, text revision), as well as simpler operations, such as proofreading, text editing, scanning, insertion of images. I taught myself these things, which you learn when you try to use a computer programme. For a year now, the students' interest has been waning. I can see the reason: my students will not become editors upon graduation, much as they would like to.

All philological departments used to train teachers, mainly, and, right now, very few graduates can make a living out of teaching. A faculty that keeps on training students for an obsolete job is in big trouble. I do hope that your young colleagues will manage to offer these students a profession that they can enjoy and off which they can live. I have been trying that for 12 years now. I brought subtitling into my MA programme, and also translation of plays acted on stage now, translation of various cultural sites, translations for various national magazines, agreements with the National Television and the Theatre and Film Academy etc. The problem arises from the fact that money-making jobs have strayed away from "culture" to the very unstable field of "services", of multinational firms. Those firms absorb a huge number

of graduates. Those are fragile, short-lived jobs, which may end before our ex-students are ready to retire, but it is a trend one cannot oppose. If we do resist it, we need a lot of courage. This is the essence of our publishing house: the courage to stick to culture.

Let's change the course of our interview a little. What values do you cherish the most and why? Over the years you have published poetry, prose, critical studies, anthologies, interviews, translations etc. How do you see the rapport between writing and translation? Do they help each other or not? How can they peacefully cohabit?

We must begin by saying that any academic is forced to obey the principle "publish or perish". This may be one of the reasons why I feel I am prepared to take a step back and change my priorities. I have always wanted to write. So far, the University came first in my life. The University of Bucharest is my *alma mater*, it is the place where I came when I was 17, and all I have ever wanted was to work in it. I can say now that the books I wrote with an academic purpose in mind no longer represent me. Literary theory is always secondary to the literary text. I have had enough of it—to put it mildly. As for the other things I might try to do from now on, *l'homme propose, Dieu dispose*. One of my father's favourite French sayings.

What differences do you see between those who are only translators and the translators who are also authors?

As a writer, you learn all sorts of tricks in using words. That gives courage and an extra tool to the translator. I suspect this is the reason why I translated more poetry than fiction, and rather into than from English, and it might also be an explanation why one of those books was even granted a prize by Poetry Society—London.

After 1989, you published a collection of interviews about censorship with Romanian writers. Tell us about the story of printing that book. What problems were there before it was issued? What about the feedback it received?

My one joy in 1989 was that I thought I had struggled free from the impossibility to publish under communism. I never published any of my so called "books for the drawer" before the fall of the Iron Curtain. I wrote that book on censorship in English, as an explanation of the state of things in post-communist Romania, and, obviously, Romanians already knew it all by heart. English seemed the correct choice. I had never thought about the publication of my books before, since I knew that would have been impossible.

Luckily for me, a small Joyce congress came to Romania, and one of the American Joyceans put me in touch with Central European University Press, which, at the time, had an American team and an American director. They accepted it at once. They never changed a comma. Unfortunately, they discarded a lot of the texts I had translated from the work of the interviewed authors, and which followed their confessions. By that combination of direct and indirect texts, I was demonstrating something that I was not willing to utter in as many words.

I would still hesitate about that, if I were to do it all over again today. To put it in a nutshell, considering that communism censored everything, anything published during that time involved certain compromises. I have never liked compromises. Only now do I realize what a moral book *Censorship in Romania* was. I was hinting at something that will only be uttered when my generation is out of the picture, and a hint cannot replace a clear statement.

Censorship in Romania also gave me a taste of the „capitalist jungle": the Americans left the publishing house to those in Budapest a few months before the book came out. I was amazed to find myself mentioned on the cover as mere „editor" of a book which was all mine: interviews, selection of the literary texts, translation of it all, proofreading. A month after publication, a letter announced me that I even owed the publishing house 500 dollars because I had failed to deliver an index that had never been requested. The musketeers are still selling the book, in Dumas-style, now, 20 years later. Many people find me and ask me for a copy, because the price is a bit uncomfortable, and they can't believe that all I have is one copy sent to me upon publication. Well, stories of liberalization...

Let's speak a bit about *English with a Key*, a volume I too used in order to learn how to fish meanings. By choosing "matching words", you succeeded not only to create a book of language practice for the youth who set off on the road of translations, but also to convey the joy, the enthusiasm of writing and the need to use the power of words to maintain a balance between the source and the target language. What did you feel when you wrote it?

When I realized I did not stand a chance of ever publishing anything connected to literature, and at that time nobody even imagined communism would ever go away, I thought I could try to write a book consisting of what I did best: teaching English. We, English teachers, have always had a second job: tutoring. It has always helped us to make ends meet. Having read everything Romanians had written in the field, I knew exactly what a pupil needed in order to pass the entrance examination and become a student of English. I knew their handbooks, I knew exactly what the school never taught them, I realized that I could really help them. I enveloped grammar in humorous sentences. I left aside the communist tractors and new man, and I wrote stories whose heroes were animals, plants, nations, fish, birds (lists of words, in fact). Sometimes, the story was just one sentence long. The recipe was "grammar and fun". Considering the absence of communist symbols, nobody wanted to publish it. In 1990, that "book for the drawer" appeared overnight, and was sold all over the country. To this day, it has been my only bestseller.

Who or what would you compare a translator with? What about the act of translation, what does it resemble?

Any translator is both the piano and the pianist at once. He thinks a writer's book in his own words, in his own language: yes, he rewrites that book. He impersonates the author, makes sure he has got the meaning, and then allows his own words to inhabit the author. No dictionary is ever enough. Literature cannot be translated *mot à mot*. A translator does need

inspiration. This makes him feel a creator, too. This pride is a danger. He may instil into the translated text meanings that the author never intended. I can't deny that Paul Valéry was right to say: *l'homme de génie est celui qui m'en donne*. I can't deny we all get carried away and it occurs to us that, in our absence, that book that we translate would not exist. Well, we must get a grip before somebody urges us to stop the conjuring tricks. The original work is not in our pockets to play with. It can exist in our minds, and all we can do is to understand and rephrase it in our mother tongue.

You have translated numerous books over the years, mainly poetry. What are the virtues of a good literary translator and how would you interpret them in the light of our times?

I would say, *C'est interdit d'interdire.* There is no doubt in my mind that a good translator is a creator himself. His creation is not the author's book entirely. But the only rule here is experience. Theory, which haunted the 20th century, has failed. When all is said and done, nothing can be decoded perfectly. Curiosity is good, but no answer is perfect. We find answers, we apply principles, and eventually we realize that things simply flow, nothing is forever there, everything must be understood and rephrased over and over again.

People speak about a translator's invisibility. What does it mean?

It's a goo word, found by a theoretician who is a translator himself. I have often wondered whether he has ever felt that his *bon mots* come back to haunt him, as T.S. Eliot did. It happens to all those who think their theory is the key to all experience. That theory is merely words (words, words...). These words are quoted endlessly, lose their meanings, students start quoting them just in order to show they will be more professional in that way, since everyone has heard about Lawrence Venuti, haven't they? These sacred words, quite often invented by brilliant writers, only make sense in their original context. Repeated like a refrain, they end up doing more harm than good. How right David Lodge was: „words come to the writer already violated by other men". I have just committed the sin of quoting another critic myself, but… it's for a good cause.

What do you think about retranslation? When is it necessary and why?

Since it is my conviction that the translation of literature is the best way to understand it, any new translation brings a new meaning to light. Nobody can call himself the only translator of a work, and no two translators reach the same version, in spite of the fact that they work with the same mother tongue. This mother tongue is like a living body: phrases are lost, or changed, conventions are dropped, mistakes turn into rules. If one translates Dickens as a dramatic author, and somebody else focuses on Dickens's humour, the two ensuing books will differ tremendously. A literary work simply says: "Let all translators come to me…"

What do you think about intralinguistic retranslation (for example, *Alice in Wonderland* for elementary level)?

Any activity that supports reading literature meets with my approval, because I am afraid that literature is a very endangered species today. Much is lost in a simplified book, of course, but at least it keeps the idea of a book alive.

You have translated many poems over the years. Which have remained close to your heart and why? When you need to choose the texts you translate, what specific criteria do you have in mind? How do you decide a text is worth being translated?

I can't give you an original answer to that: I love most the text I am translating right now. I have loved them all when I was working on them. Any text is interesting to a translator. Even slogans are a challenge. My only reason when I accept to translate a text is that I see something in it, it speaks to me and I want to share what it says. I will never try to label that communication theoretically. Intuition is a marvellous tool, an I am happy to rely on it. Now, that we talk about this: out of the multitude of theoreticians in translation studies, not one of them has explained what a "gifted" translator means. Well, that will be the day.

What are you translating now?

I am translating a brief anthology of Bloodaxe poets. Then I have a volume of yet unpublished poems by Alan Brownjohn, whom I appreciate a lot. Then there will be the volume of finalists in the Romanian poetry-translation contest „Lidia Vianu Translates". After that, two wonderful British poets, Imtiaz Dharker and Kavita A. Jindal... And there is more. I just hope I can do all that.

What are some of the traps young translators become aware of?

Nobody is safe from blunders. I can only advise young translators to read their own translations from time to time: they will find out themselves what went wrong. Translations or Cultural studies will not help. Translation is not so much taught as stolen. It is desperately hard work. One learns from one's own mistakes, and soon we all realize that our translations grow old, just like ourselves. The only thing to remember is that, whatever we translate, we must do that to the best of our abilities at the moment. I don't think much of those teachers who mock at the mistakes made by beginners. At the back of my mind, I always hear the Romanian philosopher Constantin Noica: "If you have not managed to convey at least one of your uncertainties to your young student, it means that you have failed." Well, translation is an enormous uncertainty. Translation Theory is useless there. Translation experience is the key. All I can tell apprentices in this field is: Read.

In the collection *Limbinal* (2015), poet Oana Avasilichioaei, who lives in Canada, begins her exploration of the space between languages as follows: „Border, you terrify. Border, you must dictate your own dismantling or we will perish. Purge. Border, are you listening? Are you empire?" The frontier seems to be an indifferent monster, it's shocking, we don't know

for sure if it will reply, and it has an imperial force. How is this face-to-face approach to the frontier seen from an East-European translator's point of view, considering our long frontier history, perhaps not enough researched from the perspective of translation?

Come to think of it, the endless discussion about margin and centre and transgressing the border between them sounds like a struggle between literary gangs. Some writers want to be allowed into spaces that ignore them. It is not easy to become part of an establishment other than your own. There is nothing wrong with the eagerness to be famous and gang with the best. English is spoken all over the world, but not all writers in English will be accepted by London publishing houses. A remarkable editor told me in all honesty not very long ago: "I only publish authors whose mother tongue is English." What can be wrong with that? Can we change it? Well, let me answer that question with another question: How come that only those who are outside wail about the existence of the borders?

In 1997, I was teaching in Berkeley. The American state had decided to revoke what they had called "affirmative action", which had helped certain disadvantaged students to go to university. I was walking on campus when I suddenly noticed that the students freshly pushed back where they had started had climbed up all the surrounding trees, like an army of apes. They not only wanted to be students (which they were now), they also wanted to keep privileges such as be admitted without tests, get easy grades etc. Your question makes me wonder: isn't this "border" a concept with too many political implications, a means of washing our brains, in the long run?

At home I have two of the poetry collections you translated with Adam J. Sorkin for the University of Plymouth Press: *Lines Poems Poetry* by Mircea Ivănescu and *The Book of Winter and Other Poems* by Ion Mureşan, each accompanied by the works of an artist: Florica Prevenda, in the first case; Ciprian Paleologu, in the second case. How was it to work on these projects?

In this case, my awareness of a "border" did the trick. I had a co-translator, whose mother tongue was American English, and who taught me a lot. I sometimes wondered at the way he changed words and phrases, but our joint translations did speak to Americans. He trusted me not to misread the Romanian text, and I trusted him to adapt my English to that particular time and place. When one translates into a language other than one's mother tongue, we can be certain of nothing unless a native of English works with us. Since it so happened that I have translated more into than from English, I have always made a point of having at least an English advisor, if not a co-translator. I must say I was flattered that neither Northwestern University Press nor Central European University Press needed to amend my texts. Nevertheless, I am infinitely grateful to all the natives who have helped or will help me.

You are concerned with the fate of Romanian literature in translation and with the way translators do their job. How do our institutions and the international ones stimulate the

interest for titles by Romanian authors, when they are relevant? Has this link begun to function or is it still fragile?

Support from public institutions means public money. That is very tricky. All I can say is that I am grateful to the Romanian Cultural Institute, to the University of Bucharest, to the British Council, to the National Museum of Romanian Literature, the Writers' Union and the Ministry of Culture. Their support gives me a cultural identity. But a translator is a cultural messenger who works for love of the work. Money is irrelevant there. What matters is the cultural network they can or cannot create. I have worked that way all my life. I know many English poets, and they know me. We work together. Of course, there is always (much) room for improvement, but I am easy to please. All I ask for is to be able to go on working.

Let's imagine we are in a university that wants to invest in modernization and has the necessary means. What would some of your proposals for the Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literatures be?

Our faculty is entitled "The Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literatures." That should be the starting point of this discussion. As far back as 1990, I felt theory was not enough. Cultural studies inform the students, without actually forming them. O course, you can't rely in a lecture on such an exclamation as "God, I love Dickens!" Besides text analysis, we need a theoretical point of view. We must teach the students how to generalize. Where we fail is in the way we communicate with those we teach. Any lecture delivered as a monologue full of "historiographic metafiction" and similar sacred cows is doomed to fail. There is only one second between that and the student's reaching for his telephone and surfing the net during our class. We need interactivity and we need to focus on the literary text first of all. We must talk in "Demotic English", however complicated the truths we teach may be. There is a whole new world out there. When I began, I knew perfectly well what my students needed. It is the turn of your generation now. The students need a totally new face of literature than the one theory rather hides than explains. You must give them what they need. Either do this or lose them.