

The Reception of Recent Translations of Romanian Literature in Sweden

by Björn Apelkvist

The interest for Romanian Literature in Sweden has currently reached a peak that does not stand comparison with previous circumstances. On the one hand we have the newly started publishing house 2244, which specializes in books from the Black Sea region, not to the least books with Romanian origin. On the other hand the main literary event in Sweden, that is the book fair (Bokmässan) arranged every autumn in Gothenburg, Sweden`s second city, had Romanian Literature as its principal focus this year, which meant the occurrence of several significant contemporary Romanian writers presenting their work. The book fair also instigated the launching of new Romanian fiction books in Swedish, a revitalized attempt to launch previously unpublished authors for a Swedish public. A good example of the last mentioned is the short story anthology *Skräpliv. Rumänska berättelser* (“Trash Life. Romanian tales”), including texts by already renown writers on Swedish soil such as Mircea Cărtărescu and Norman Manea, but also introducing less known names like Dan Lungu, Daniela Crasnaru and Gabriela Adameşteanu.

In this article I will present some viewpoints on how the reception of this and other recently published works by Romanian writers in Swedish has been, in some of the main newspapers at the very center of the public discussion about literature in Sweden. Svenska Dagbladet is hereby the natural starting point, the cultural supplement of which by tradition is the most prestigious in the Swedish context, but also articles from for example Dagens Nyheter, the other main quality newspaper, will be commented upon.

A first, unavoidable observation is to what a large extent not only the original writers, but also the translators into Swedish and the critics, are represented by Romanians, that is Romanians who for a long time have been living in Sweden, and now have gained a position in the cultural domain as publicists. First of all we have Dan Shafran, the respected head of the ICR (Institutul Cultural Roman) in Stockholm, who is involved in several of the new launchings of Romanian Literature in Sweden, often as the initiative force but also to a high degree as translator. Jeana Jarslbro, critic at Svenska Dagbladet but also translator, is another striking example, a name that just as Shafrans keeps recurring when one takes a glance at Romanian books published in Sweden.

This is of course an inspiring example of how the Swedish society, when it comes to cultural issues at least, seems apt and willing to let foreign voices make themselves heard, to let people with a background in other countries and cultures vitalize the Swedish sphere and

bring in their perspectives. Naturally these Romanian immigrants also have knowledge of their own literature that is incomparable to any Swedish expert, for whom this unavoidably still is an unexplored cultural territory, with some few exceptions.

On the other hand, to what extent, then, does there exist a genuinely Swedish perspective on Romanian literature in Swedish? What is the appreciation among the Swedes themselves of the literature that Romanian immigrants who have come to Sweden to such a large extent conduct the launching of? Are the books that are published what Swedes actually are asking for? How Swedish is in the end this recent boom for Romanian literature in Sweden? In general, might there be other, less fortunate consequences of the fact that the Romanians themselves tend to initiate, publish, translate and evaluate their literature in the Swedish cultural domain? These questions I will also try to ponder in this article, where the main interest however surely is the recently published books themselves, and their appearance in the literary supplements of some significant Swedish newspapers.

Let me start with some already well known writers, who for a long time have been available and have gained appreciation among the Swedish readership, which by the way statistically speaking is highly active - the Swedes buy and read books more than most people in Europe. Philosopher Emil Cioran's first book to be written in French, *Precis de decomposition*, was in 2012 for the first time published in Swedish, and the reviews here rapidly give proof of how familiar and important his works are also in the Swedish context. Sven André writes in an article published in *Tidningen Kulturen*, which is actually an excerpt from the foreword by him written for the book, about how refreshing Cioran's "anti-philosophy" is to read in a time where positive thinking is constantly marketed by the media.

As someone who really cares for us, Cioran tells us things we need to know although we didn't know it, the cold and blackness of his words actually give us new strength concludes André, which is exactly the point made also by critic Magdalena Lowden at *Dagens Nyheter*. The latter dwells upon the big paradox of how a thinker so pessimistic and misanthropic, in the end actually creates communion and a sense of relief among the readers. For the Nordic public, trained in a large tradition of tragic drama focused on problematic issues for example, and with a lot of dark humour as well, Cioran continues to appear as an old and cherished friend, an example of how thoroughly cultural borders can be overcome, when the means are of the highest, and therefore universal, cultural quality.

More contemporary writers, now in the area of fiction, who in a similar way have become well established and respected by the Swedish readership are Mircea Cărtărescu and Herta

Müller, the former making several appearances at the book fair in Gothenburg in September. The volume *Alltid samma snö och alltid samma farbror* ("Always the same snow and the same uncle"), containing different shorter texts, among them the famous speech made at the awarding ceremony of the Nobel prize, is the latest work to be published by Herta Müller. A look at the review of Martin Lagerholm at Svenska Dagbladet, gives a good picture of how acclaimed she is in today's Sweden, mainly for her capacity to fill every sentence with intensive meaning, her stylistic density.

With her central focus on the trauma of communist totalitarianism, she however also illustrates an important aspect of the Romanian literature up until now available in Swedish – it is rather difficult to find examples of texts that do not deal, directly or indirectly, with communism. Is this because it corresponds so well to the expectations and connotations concerning Romania among Swedes, one might ask. Also the less known writers Daniela Crasnaru and Ioana Nicolaie, emerge as vitally encapsulated in an unresolved conflict with the circumstances once dictated by the old regime, the latter for example writing about her pregnancy in a way that would have been unthinkable during communism, in this way mobilizing her creative impulses, just like Herta Müller, in a retrospective opposition to those dark experiences.

Moving on to Cărtărescu, of the same generation as Herta Müller and in his own right a spokesman for the trauma of communism as well as a severe, utterly unforgiving critic of contemporary Romanian society - although certainly much more than that, too - we find for example the third part of his trilogy *Orbitor*, since 2008 completely available in Swedish. This book is also significantly put in the context of communism's iron grip on Eastern Europe, in a highly initiated review by acclaimed Swedish novelist Steve Sem-Sandberg, where Ceaușescu's regime is identified as the very precondition for Cărtărescu's prose.

On the other hand, Sem-Sandberg also brings into focus how Cărtărescu, from a more strictly literary point of view, seems to offer everything a contemporary Swedish novel doesn't. Namely in the sense that his high ambitions of giving a universal explanation of the world, his tendency to constantly break the form that has been established, his inclination for creative excess and philosophical explorations at length, truly are not typical elements in Swedish prose of today, where writing in a simple language on a level close to reality is much more representative, and has been so for a long time.

So both in the case of Müller and Cărtărescu, evidently the big names of contemporary literature with Romanian origin, the appreciation of their significant literary qualities are to be sure acknowledged and explored at length by the critics, who in this case also are represented

not so much by Romanians operating in the Swedish context. The shadow of communism is however constantly strongly present, and this becomes even clearer when we look at the launching of less known or formerly unavailable Romanian writers, with the already mentioned volume “Trash Life” as an illustrative example. Critic Fabian Kastner presents the book in an article that keeps returning to the main theme of the anthology, the phantoms of the dark years of communism and the longing for departure, exile, emigration.

Surely within this all-encompassing post-communist framework also other, more purely literary elements are identified also, such as the a sense of the surrealistic, the absurd and an inclination towards dark irony, for example in relation to Norman Manea, one of the already familiar writers appearing in this volume. Manea is another writer, like Cărtărescu and Müller, who has been ambitiously launched in Sweden, most recently with *Lyan* (“The Apartment”), dealing with the confused destiny of exile Romanians living on Manhattan. The Dada movement, with its acknowledged Romanian origin through Tristan Tzara, is also a purely aesthetic phenomenon that one comes upon, when looking into the status of Romanian literature in Sweden of today. But here too, dada significantly enough appears through the looking glass of communism: Andrei Cordescu’s Essay book *Tzara och Lenin spelar schack* (“Tzara and Lenin are playing Chess”) is the most recent example, published in 2009, and critic Ellen Mattson of Svenska Dagbladet clearly establishes the book’s significant point of contrasting the joyful, everlasting open-mindedness of dadaism with Lenin’s rigid totalitarianism. Even Dada becomes a reaction against communism.

Along with Manea, who himself is living in the United States since the 1980s, Cordescu’s book on Tzara completes the picture of how writers who in a significant way has put a distance between themselves and their native Romania, and especially communist Romania, seems to be the ones that mainly are launched and promoted in Sweden. Their significantly negative and critical conception on Romania is what a Swedish reader mainly is left with. Might this be so because the people involved in launching them in Sweden themselves belong to this generation, this category of individuals who have shared these dark experiences and likewise have left their country, through exile or not? And is it not mainly Swedes with little knowledge of Romanian reality of today, who continue to relate the country first and foremost with communism? Do the writers which are launched correspond to the request of a general Swedish reader, who might have learned a little more about this culture at the other margin of Europe, perhaps visited the country or met people coming from there? Is there another picture of Romania yet to be presented, from within the country itself, so to say?

As a Swedish person who has lived and worked in Romania for the last seven years, I would be inclined to answer a careful yes to these questions, which in no way means a dispraisal of what actually has been done when it comes to launching Romanian literature in Sweden. It only means a modest wish for other stories, other books, that would complete the picture and give it more nuances, other perspectives, perhaps of more immediate interest.

We have also the question of translations, the fact that, when it comes to books actually translated from Romanian into Swedish, so many of them have been done by people with Romanian background, and not by native Swedish language users – a problem far too complex to enter into here. Suffice it to say that I have in my own experience had the opportunity to see how a work, *Dagbok från Paltiniș* (“The Paltiniș Diary”) by Gabriel Liiceanu, before its publishing in Swedish ran the risk of becoming a victim of severe mistakes concerning its Swedish wording. The writer himself in this case intervened, and insisted on priority and the final say given to an old friend of his, a woman who came from Romania to Sweden as a refugee in the 1960s and learned Swedish as a grown-up, concerning the shaping of the version in Swedish. As one of the Swedish persons involved in the project, I found great relief when in the end the Swedish publisher of the book sent the manuscript for a last check done by Swedish native speakers, since the manuscript at that point turned out to be full of the inevitable imperfections that any user of a second language is bound to fall victim to, when such an advanced and sophisticated text is at hand.

The fact that Inger Johansson’s translations of Cărtărescu’s novels have gained such particular praise and found so many appreciative Swedish readers, is evidently due to her having been given the chance and freedom, as a native Swedish language user, to recreate them into a Swedish form that appears natural and palatable for a Swedish reader. The prospect of having more translations into Swedish made by native speaker Swedish translators, and more reviews by Swedish critics who have had the opportunity to discover Romania from the outside, and see the country and its culture without predestined attitudes, seems to me a highly desirable one.

Perhaps there is a slow process towards such a development, with not only Inger Johansson (and other Swedish translators of Romanian language, such as my wife Åsa Apelkvist, the main translator of “The Paltiniș Diary” into Swedish), but also Swedish authors like Henrik Nilsson appearing, rendering initiated comments on Romanian literature and society. The poetry anthology *Om jag inte får tala med någon nu* (“If I am not allowed to speak to somebody now”) might seem as a premonition of this, with poems partly translated by young Romanian and Swedish poets themselves, using English as a helping tool. This compilation of

contemporary poetry, published in 2011, is clearly an attempt to give an updated glimpse into what is happening right now in the Romanian cultural context. And no longer is the shadow of communism so clear, instead the focus is shifted more directly upon problems of the present Romanian society. Being an obvious result of intercultural communication, of efforts made both on the Swedish and the Romanian part, including both older and younger generations, driven by an evident spirit of co-operation, this is a volume one would hope leads the way towards a future of ever tighter cultural connections between these two margins of the new Europe, Sweden and Romania.

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