Interview with Nicolas Cavaillès, Translator of Romanian Contemporary Literature into French*

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Born in 1981, Nicolas Cavaillès is one of the major translators of Romanian literature into French. He translated modern classics including Urmuz, the symbolist poet Emil Botta, the philosopher Constantin Noica, and contemporary poets, essayists, and novelists: Gabriela Adameșteanu, Ileana Mălăncioiu, Constantin Acosmei, Radu Aldulescu, Mircea Cărtărescu, Norman Manea, Dumitru Tsepeneag, and Matei Vişniec. He also published Cioran’s French works in Gallimard’s “Bibliothèque de la Pléiade” and authored three books with Sonneur (Paris): Vie de monsieur Leguat (Goncourt de la Nouvelle Prize 2014), Pourquoi le saut des baleines (Gens de Mer Prize, 2015), and Les Huit Enfants Schumann (2016).

DU: After the fall of the communist regime in many countries of the former Communist Bloc in 1989, a new contemporary literature market emerged. Cultural institutions and literary agents, including editors and translators both from these countries and from France, supported the promotion and translation of contemporary writers. For instance, in 2005 “Les Belles Étrangères” program introduced French readers to six male and six female contemporary Romanian writers: Gabriela Adameșteanu, Ștefan Agopian, Ana Blandiana, Mircea Cărtărescu, Gheorghe Crăciun, Letiția Ilea, Dan Lungu, Ion Mureșan, Marta Petreu, Simona Popescu, Cecilia Ștefănescu, and Vlad Zografi. In your opinion, did events and projects such as “Salon du Livre de Paris” and “Les Belles Étrangères” have a significant impact on the French language market?

NC: Such events become integrated naturally in the continual ebb and flow of festivals and book fairs in the economic system of books in France, a “market” that hardly depends on the literary quality of the books that it consecrates or ignores. For a less-known literature like the Romanian one, the light that

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they briefly cast allows them to reach an unexpected and far more numerous readers. Beyond this, the writers you are citing have had very different fortunes in France since, hardly comparable. But an outstanding poet like Ion Mureșan, for instance, cannot be reduced to any “market.”

DU: In your opinion, does the cultural politics of State-funded institutions such as the Romanian Cultural Institute have a positive and visible impact on raising publishers’ interest in contemporary Romanian literature?

NC: The Romanian Cultural Institute has changed its direction and politics often since its beginnings. The thing in itself is lamentable, but unavoidable. Some years were better than others for the diffusion of Romanian literature. Obviously, financial support is decisive for foreign publishers, and the Romanian Cultural Institute seems to have understood this.

DU: In two articles, “The literary field between the state and the market” and “Globalization and cultural diversity in the book market: The case of literary translations in the US and in France,” Gisèle Sapiro described the Centre National du Livre as a state-funded project meant to push against the pressures of the market among other similar institutions. Do you find the French editors’ and translators’ choices from Romanian literature reflect a similar position—to push against the pressures of the market—or do they also take the market rationale into account when choosing writers?

NC: There are very many different, sometimes divergent cases among the editors and translators who work on Romanian literature. Some of them, a minority (which I’m not part of) are much more engaged than the others in promoting or defending their books. Either way, choosing to introduce a Romanian writer constitutes—from the economic point of view you are adopting—is a definite risk; it means overcoming the de facto censorship of the pressure for sales figures. But beyond anything, it’s mainly the books and the writers—each with its specific case—that motivates the editors and translators, including the case of the exceptional Non Lieu Publishing Press directed by Jérôme Carassou, who—among others—specializes in classical and contemporary Romanian literature. So it is not about pushing against the pressures of the “market” but rather about liberating oneself from it as much as possible.

DU: In 2006, the Prix Médicis étranger went to Norman Manea’s The Hooligan’s Return, a moving memoir that narrates historic traumas like the pogrom against the Jews in World War II and the fraught relationship between intellectuals and the Romanian Communist regime. From your experience as a translator, do you have in view also the present interest in such stories coming from the countries of the former Communist Bloc, and how much does this respond also to post-1989 market interests?