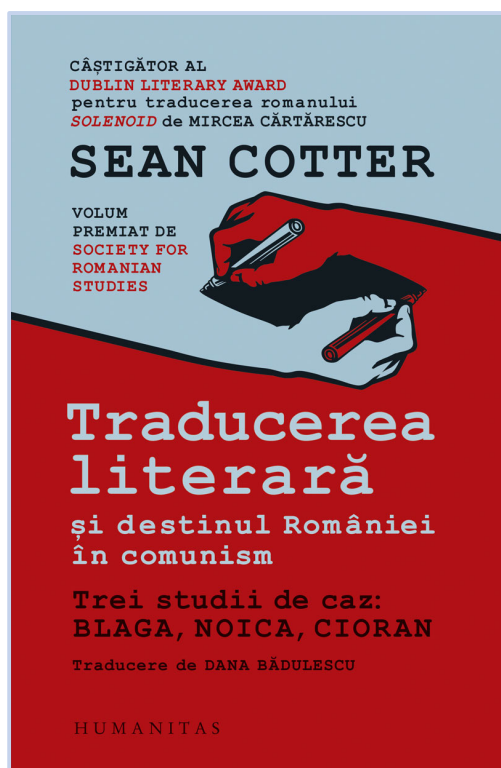


## BOOKS

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**Sean Cotter, *Traducerea literară și destinul României în comunism. Trei studii de caz: Blaga, Noica, Cioran*, translated and with a preface by Dana Bădulescu, București: Humanitas, 2024, 248 p.**

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Sean Cotter, professor of literature and translation studies at the University of Texas at Dallas, is undoubtedly one of the most important international scholars interested in Romanian culture and literature. Dr Cotter is both a scholar with a solid background in comparative literature, proven by his Ph.D. at the University of Michigan, and a versed translator from Romanian. Up to now Dr Cotter gave excellent English equivalents to the works of important Romanian writers, such as Mateiu Caragiale, Nichita Stănescu, Magda Cârneci, or Mircea Cărtărescu. In 2014, Cotter published a monograph entitled *Literary Translation and the Idea of Minor Romania* at the University of Rochester Press.

Cotter's study was translated into Romanian by Dana Bădulescu under a new and very well-chosen title: *Traducerea literară și destinul României în comunism* [*Literary Translation and Romania's Destiny in Communism*]. This modification facilitates the reception of this work in Romania where some

readers might react negatively to a title that they could perceive as a foreign perspective imbued with some hegemonic undertones. Dana Bădulescu is professor at the Faculty of Letters of "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University in Iași, Romania and an experienced translator from English into Romanian. Her wide scholarly interests range from British and American modernism and postmodernism to transnationalism and poetics.



Bădulescu succeeded in giving Cotter's scholarly text a Romanian translation that "flows" smoothly and naturally. The translator's toil is hidden with such dexterity that one could say Cotter's book was a text originally thought, conceived, and written in Romanian. Bădulescu found the best Romanian substitutes for Cotter's intellectual style.

Undoubtedly, it is very important that Bădulescu also offered Romanian readerships a metatext where she elaborated on the importance of translation starting from Cotter's work, as a particular case. Because the translator must enter the intimate levels of the source text, it is no wonder that Bădulescu started by explaining the minor as a way of cultural survival through translation. The translator having spent her childhood and adolescence in the Romania of the 1970's and the 1980's, this translation is also a personal(ised) experience. It brings back memories and makes Bădulescu relive a historical period that she experienced directly and painfully. There is a strong bond between the author and the translator as Bădulescu reiterated Cotter's research. She had the ambition to find the original of the quotations from Blaga, Noica, and Cioran that Cotter had translated into English in the source book. In this way, Bădulescu avoided a third degree translation which would have sounded awkward and maybe even disrespectful to the Romanian reader. The translation became a sort of space constructed through the personal interactions between the author and the translator and situated at the intersections between the English and the Romanian languages.

The book starts with a well-documented presentation of Romania's forcible transition from the interwar period to the span of time when Soviet troops kept Romania under a brutal occupation and minorization. The Romanian reader is fascinated to find out details about the complicity of important scholars with the new regime. For instance, one can read about Iorgu Iordan's contribution to the Sovietization of Romanian linguistics and his insistence that all writers should learn Russian<sup>1</sup>. On the one hand, the Soviet Union imposed an ideological and political "translation" of Romania that alienated Romania from itself. On the other hand, translation, a minor and minorized writerly activity, had a complex role for the writers of the time. It provided survival for some writers who were allowed to publish only translations under their own name or hidden under the protective author(ity) of a writer whose name was accepted by the regime.

In other cases, translation was a refuge and a discreet, very discreet defiance of communist censorship. The three cases chosen by Cotter to show the importance and the many-sided valences of translation during this period are also intertwined with considerations about the inner and/or the outer exile experienced by Blaga<sup>2</sup>, Noica and Cioran.

Most of the study is dedicated to Blaga who responded to the harsh treatment to which he was submitted from 1944 to 1960 by becoming a great translator that

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<sup>1</sup> One might wonder why one of the main research institutes functioning under the authority of the Romanian Academy is still named: The "Iorgu Iordan – Al. Rosetti" Institute of Linguistics.

<sup>2</sup> In 2020 Nicolae Mareş published a collection of letters and documents entitled: *Lucian Blaga – traducător, traductology* [*Lucian Blaga – A Translator and Translation Studies Specialist*], postfaced by Zenovie Cârlegea. This book is rather a data base useful to anyone interested in the topic, but lacking the sophistication of Sean Cotter's academic study.

defied the Iron curtain. Blaga's translations from several great authors (Goethe, Keats, Yeats) that belong to world culture were a cultural challenge to the new order imposed by the Soviets. Cotter considers that Blaga became a national translator in spite and because of his alienation and marginalization during the communist regime. It is known that Blaga was fluent in German, but had no command of English. In this case, Blaga needed and relied on collaborators. According to Cotter, Blaga's only collaborator in the translation of the English poems published in his 1957 collection was Flori Gavrilă. Cornelia Blaga, the poet's wife, is only mentioned as an amanuensis. Or the role of Blaga's wife in the poet's life and work (especially, in the English translations) deserves more exploration and, probably, even an independent monograph.


The next chapters extend the temporal span of the research (up to the 1970's and the 1980's) and their object is Noica and Cioran. According to Cotter, Noica prefers to adapt to Ceaușescu's regime and his strategy is trans-lating, from many points of view. During the inter-war period and World War II Noica translated from Cecil Day Lewis, Dickens, H.G. Wells, Descartes, Kant, Saint Augustine. After he was freed from prison, Noica and his circle toiled to translate from Plato, Hegel, and Heidegger, which constitutes a sort of implicit dissidence from the officialised Marxism. Conceptualizing Romania as the translator of Europe, Noica was honoured to be part of this national effort to transgress the closed space behind the Iron Curtain and defy the Cold War. Cioran's defiance was different. He left Romania before the imposition of the communist regime and never came back. Since his youth Cioran had been intensely preoccupied by Romania's minor status. Cotter analyses Sanda Stolojan's translation of Cioran's 1986 book *Des larmes et des saints* (*Tears and Saints*). Cioran shortened the French text, which is not so much a translation as an adaptation, according to what Cioran considered to be more suitable to the French taste and secularism. In spite of the distance he takes from Romania, both geographically and existentially, Cioran's interest in the specificity of Romanianness survived in a modified form all his life. On the one hand, Cioran distances himself from Blaga's space understood as the space of Mioritza, a sort of nationalistic totem. On the other hand, Cioran is still anxious about the minor but also aware of its potential.

Cotter's competence allows him to daringly polemicize with world-known literary theoreticians. An excellent example, in this respect, is Pascale Casanova who considers that all writers from the so-called "deficient" literatures dream only of recognition in the major cultural centres of the world. Casanova's sample of this tendency is Cioran.

In its theoretical section, Cotter's monograph meets half way the work of Virgil Nemoianu, a prominent Romanian American scholar, who authored *A Theory of the Secondary: Literature, Progress, and Reaction*, published at John Hopkins University Press in 1989 and translated into Romanian for Univers Publishing Press by Livia Szasz Câmpeanu, in 1997. Both scholars' contention is that there is a new formal relationship between the principal and the secondary (with Nemoianu), the major and the minor (with Cotter). Both scholars are aware of the relative character of hegemony and of the impossibility of a uniform equality between and within their opposing terms. Nemoianu's and Cotter's terminological (and not only) couples are made up of opposing, but not contradictory terms which must be seen in their complex and multiple intertwining and

interference. The main difference between the two academics is that Nemoianu privileges the aesthetic character of the relationship he explores, whereas Cotter is more interested in the political character of his doublet and in the impact of the political upon culture. The two books do not compete with each other, they coexist and complete each other as two very valuable researches.

Beyond any doubt, Sean Cotter's excellent survey brings a new and very valuable contribution to the study of Romania's (cultural) history, to the study of totalitarian regimes by exploring communist Romania from a new angle: the role of translation and translators in a culture obliged to convert to a new ideology. The case studies of the three great Romanian intellectuals invite to meditation upon the historical confrontation between culture and political violence. Indirectly, Cotter warns us that even if democracy is possible, it is not guaranteed, and the danger of slipping into a dictatorial regime should never be underestimated. An issue more topical than ever!

**Mihaela MUDURE**   
*Babeş-Bolyai University*  
*Cluj-Napoca, Romania*  
*michaela.mudure@ubbcluj.ro*