East meets West
Interview with translator George T. Sipos

by Loredana PUNGĂ

George T. Sipos is one of the Romanian translators who work with languages many of us would be happy to know a few words in – in his case, Japanese. For more than 25 years now, he has translated from Japanese authors like Yasunari Kawabata, Yukio Mishima, Ryūnosuke Akutagawa, Jun’ichirōTanizaki, Doppo Kunikida, Kunio Kishida, Riichi Yokomitsu, among others. Some of his translations have been commissioned by famous Romanian publishers such as Humanitas or Curtea Veche, while others have been printed in well-known cultural periodicals like România literară, Contrapunct, Timpul. There is no doubt that, in all of them, he has made East seamlessly meet West.

George Sipos is a specialist in Japanese language, literature and culture, and holds a PhD degree in East Asian Languages and Civilizations from the University of Chicago.

LP: The Romanian public has reacted positively to your translations of Japanese literature, which means that you have done your job successfully. Have you been institutionally trained to become a translator? Do you hold a degree in translation?

GS: Well, it depends on what you mean by that. As you know, back when you and I went to college in early mid-90s in Romania, there was no such thing as a college degree for professional translators or interpreters, though translation was resorted to during some classes, basically as a means of improving our knowledge of a foreign language. That, of course, did not stop any of us from making some additional income from translation/interpretation gigs on the side even during college, but, no, I was never properly trained to become a translator. I hold a BA degree in Japanese language and literature with a second major in Romanian language and literature from the University of Bucharest’s Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literatures, but that was about it.
LP: If it was not institutional training that channeled you towards translation, then what was it? How did you discover your passion for translation? Where did you start from?

GS: I don’t mean to sound trite, but I feel like I always wanted to translate, to facilitate communication between people who could not understand each other due to such trivial a thing as language. I grew up exposed to several languages, with a paternal grandfather who was a native speaker of Hungarian and a maternal grandmother who was bilingual with Russian and Romanian, so moving between languages has never been a big surprise for me. The idea of translation itself simply meant for me that you help people understand one another.

But, to answer your question, I discovered my passion for literary translation early on, during my second year in college, when I read my first short story in Japanese. I do not know if it was the excitement of finally managing to understand the meaning of a whole literary text written in Japanese, the sheer beauty of that wonderful story, or the fact that I immediately wanted to share my joy with everyone else that prompted me to try my hand at rendering it into Romanian. It took me a full night to translate that text and then I spent several days afterwards to edit it. At that time, Ioana Pârvulescu, the extraordinary literary critic and writer, used to be my Romanian literature instructor at the University of Bucharest. She was also an editor for the cultural magazine România literară. It was due to her encouragement that I started writing and publishing book and magazine reviews there, just as I was exploring translation. In one of my trips to the România literară office (I still remember that old building and the wooden stairs going up to the three tiny rooms where editors were always toiling away over texts for what was back then, perhaps, the most important cultural publication in the country), I happened to mention my “great” translation achievement (i.e. the two-page translation of Nobel Prize winner Yasunari Kawabata’s Amagasa (The Umbrella) which to me seemed like climbing the Everest) to writer Adriana Bittel, another editor of the same publication. She asked me to send the translation, and very much to my amazement, it got published the following week. I must admit that I was terrified to see it in print, although it wasn’t the first time that I had a text of mine published. I was terrified (or is it more appropriate to call it “petrified”?) because the moment I read it in print, I thought it was just terrible and I was tempted to believe that everyone that would read it would feel the same way. However, people seemed to like it. That’s how I discovered that I must have some inclination for literary translation and for rendering cultural meaning into another language in general. Even so, it took me two more years before I felt that I can translate and publish my next text, this time a well-known short story belonging to modernist writer Ryūnosuke Akutagawa, Kumo no ito (The Spider Thread).
LP: *Looked at from the outside, translating Japanese literature into a European language and accommodating it into a European culture seem not to be easy at all. What would you say are the general challenges of doing these?*

GS: Japanese literature and culture are no longer quite that unfamiliar to European audiences and readership in general and to Romanians in particular. But, if I were to think of certain challenges that we are still facing today when we attempt to render the cultural meaning of a literary text, I would have to say that the most difficult hurdle is the uphill battle against the exoticization of Japan as perceived by the general public. Evidently, this is not a new phenomenon, but something that started way back during the prewar period. It was, however, accelerated and exacerbated during the 1950s and 1960s, and it touched everything Japan means, including its modern writers and their literature. Such is the desire to project unto Japan and Japanese culture a sum of exotic elements that even when you try to argue that there needs not to be anything “exotic” about the work of at least certain postwar writers, you almost inevitably hit a wall formed of editors, publishers and readers who are very vocal in expressing their dissatisfaction with you and your rendition of their beloved authors.

To me, the exoticization of Japanese culture, a phenomenon akin to what Edward Said called “orientalism”, prevents its proper reception in a target language, no matter what this language is. Many of the postwar period translations from Japanese into English, or French (two languages that I am proficient in), were evidently geared towards promoting that “exoticism” when it came to Japan, most probably for commercial reasons. After all, a Japan that wasn’t that different from the United States, Britain or France, for instance, was not prone to sell the translations, right? And I am not necessarily pointing fingers at anyone here, not at fellow translators, and certainly not at book editors and publishers, but somewhere, somehow, that “exotic” Japan became the only way you could translate and localize Japanese culture.

In Romania, our first translations of Japanese literature were not done directly from Japanese, as we did not have enough specialists to engage in such endeavors in the years immediately following the war. Not to talk about the ideological wall that had temporarily separated Romanian culture from its traditional inspirations, the French, English and German cultures, and had placed it within the sphere of influence of an equally great, but less appreciated culture, the Russian. So, Romanians started to translate ideologically approved Japanese literature from Russian in the early 1950s. It took until about the 1970s for translations of Japanese literature from French and English to make their way into our bookstores. And, with them, that overtone of the “exotic”, particularly present in translations from French.
LP: Have you met with specific challenges? Perhaps dictated by the characteristics of a certain text, the styles of a certain author, the context of reception of your translation...

GS: Yes, of course. There are always challenges when it comes to translating from Japanese, and not only. I for one tend to revisit my translations periodically, either because publishers want to issue a new edition or because, after doing some research on adjacent topics, I feel that I might have misrepresented some things in the work or the words of a certain author. To me, a translation is never “definitive”, just like a work of art or a piece of literature cannot be. Most of the time, artists make peace with what they put out there, but that doesn’t mean that they feel satisfied with the final format of their work. I feel the same way about my translations. Sometimes, when I reread the translated text in parallel with the original, I can’t even fathom what could have possessed me to render certain phrases the way I did, and I frantically start re-translating. After all, translation is a Sisyphus-like kind of work. And because it is a work of love, you can’t really let go of it.

Now, translators of cultures and literatures such as Japanese face yet another challenge – that of rendering meaning from a marginal culture into another. For students of modernity like myself, Japan, in spite of its postwar (as well as contemporary) global cultural centrality, remains a “marginal” culture. And I don’t mean that in a negative or derogatory way. There is nothing more damaging to a regional culture than to make its marginality a bad thing. Japan’s is a marginal culture because of the way in which it has always had to adjust to a cultural center, one that switched over the course of its history from China (and to a certain extent Korea, at a time when Buddhism was introduced to the archipelago from the Korean peninsula) to Portugal and the Netherlands during the 16th-18th centuries, and then, later on to Britain, the United States, France and Germany. That doesn’t make Japan’s culture less relevant or meaningful today, but it doesn’t make it a “central” culture, if we were to employ the dichotomy Center-Margin all the way.

On the other hand, Romania’s is also a “marginal” culture, one that pivoted as well, throughout its history, from one center to another, from the Byzantine to the Ottoman to the Russian and Polish Empires to the Austro-Hungarian and then, at the dawn of modernity, the beginning of the 19th century for Romania, France, Britain, Germany and, of course, the United States. Finally, over the past three decades, Romanians have been looking far and wide for cultural “centers”, from Western Europe to the Middle East and from Latin America to the United States and Canada.

Translating between two such marginal cultures makes things interesting and challenging at the same time. While our cultures might share certain characteristics, many others are different, and reference points are often missing. For instance, when dealing with a reference to
France or England, it may so happen that that particular reference is completely unknown in Romania and it requires special explanation and footnoting, just as much as a very characteristically Japanese reference would (think about, for example, an obscure film or pop culture element that vanished into a forgotten corner of history since its occurrence, many decades ago).

**LP:** Have you ever felt that you could have done things more appropriately? Have you returned to your published translations for changes?

**GS:** As I said, I always do. I don’t think that the work of the translator is truly ever done. Although I might be tempted to ignore reference to an obscure event or to omit, in the target language, reference to an object or piece of clothing that is very specific to the Japanese culture the first time I translate a text, almost inevitably, when I look at that same text again, I decide to include that reference or transfer the Japanese word in its original form. Other times, it just remains a struggle, no matter how many times you go back to the original. For instance, one of my major questions with translations from Japanese is as trivial as how to properly render toponyms and other proper names into Romanian. A Buddhist temple’s name will always have ji at the end, but that is because ji means temple in Japanese. Translators all over the world tend to render those names as Temple XX-ji, but to me, that sounds wrong, as it feels like you are repeating the word “temple”. However, calling it just Temple XX opens up the possibility that readers who are familiar with that particular temple are not going to understand what you are referring to, because in Japanese, you only hear it pronounced as XX-ji. And so on...

**LP:** Kareem James Abu-Zeid, award-winning translator of Arabic literature, once said that he sees himself as a conduit – there is an input and an output and he feels like the space where the transformation from one to the other occurs. How important do you think this “conduit” is? Is the role of the translator as cultural mediator vital?

**GS:** I think it’s certainly productive and relevant to think of the translator as a conduit. Nevertheless, I somehow feel that it also makes the translator seem like a passive entity. As if the text in the original language can enter the translator and then exit at the other end completely transformed, no action needed. I don’t know why, but it sounds to me as if the translator were something like a translation machine, like Google Translate. So, I am not convinced that that is the right way to think of the translator. It might just be that thinking of translators that way is what makes many publishers vehement about not including translators’ names on the book covers, together with the
authors’. Book reviewers sometimes forget to even mention the name of the translators when they write about that work, which is a pity.

On the contrary, I think that translators are extremely active agents in the process of cultural rendition and localization of a cultural “other”. We put body and soul into de-otherizing the cultures of those outside a certain linguistic and cultural paradigm. Because, ultimately, that is our role, as translators: to render different cultures familiar, to make them accessible so that our readers become aware of how similar we all are as humans, regardless of where we live, what language we speak or what belief system or lifestyle we abide by. And, in the process, we join forces with the authors, we help them navigate the uncertain waters of another language, so that they can become as beloved in the words of that other language and in that other culture as they are in their own. I dare say that translators actually co-author the target language work. That is why I don’t believe in the old adagio Traduttore, traditore. For translators don’t betray the authors, they support their voice and artistic vision and help them become true contributors to the cultural heritage of humanity and to the overall advancement of the human race.