

Literary Barter: A Network Science Approach to Agency in Translation

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Abstract

This essay proposes complexity and computational network analysis as fitting paradigm and methodology for studying contemporary literary translators' agency. Grounded in the rhizomatic structure of networks, this approach unearths the importance of translation-based literary barter for the robustness and stability of a translation sub-system, in our case the sub-system of contemporary poetry translation from American and Canadian English into Romanian. Using a mixed-method approach that combines close reading (qualitative analysis) and distant reading (quantitative analysis), the research shows that translators possess an essentially connective mind and that their own interests and network of personal connections are salient in starting and maintaining a substantial exchange of inter-cultural transfers in a transnational context. Complexity thinking provides the premises for demonstrating that translation is highly sensitive to its initial conditions of production, thus is reliant on translators, and the computational network analyses prove consequential for documenting the role of translators in initiating and carrying out literary translation projects.

Keywords

computational network analysis, complexity thinking, agency in translation, digital humanities, literary translation

Sociology has been struggling to find a suitable model to account for diversity in society, and Translation Studies (TS) has long followed in its footsteps, trying to solve a similar problem, that of translation complexity at all levels. The efforts of many researchers in the sociology of translation have been certainly fruitful (e.g. Chesterman 2006 and 2009; Tyulenev 2011) and added many layers of complexity to the image of translators, but have seldom addressed important issues such as one-time translations and how such translation acts fit in the wider picture. Scholars working on small slices of literary translation into lesser-known languages, on genres that are not considered socially influential, and on translators that run the whole gamut from being socially recognized for their work to translating only seldom and out of a whim, have not found a proper ally in systemic, top-bottom approaches such as Pierre Bourdieu's (1993) or Niklas Luhmann's (1995). Furthermore, working with contemporary literature translation means that the effects of translation become almost impossible to describe beyond bibliographical work and that a proper account of contemporary translation projects and translators' agency would be possible only when they become a thing of the past. Any translation historiography begins here and now and cannot be divorced from sociography; yet, the question of how to appropriately render the complexity of such phenomena remains partly unanswered.

Processes in this universe are vacillations between chaos and order and they exist because they reach and strive to maintain themselves in a spot at the edge of chaos. Literary translations should be no exception because they are not just an act of communication and a body of intercultural work, but an *embodiment* of their translators' agencies. Before they become objects that join any global or local flow of cultural goods, literary products need to be examined, as Nicole Hayles suggests, at "the experiential level that captures the particular individual articulation of discourse" (1990, 193–194). Once they are produced, translations are performed or enacted by their agents, by their medium of publication and by the network in which they are circulated. In other words, they are heavily agent- and context-dependent before they become hegemonic body of works. "Relative to the body," argues Hayles, "embodiment is elsewhere, at once excessive and deficient in its infinite variations, particularities, and abnormalities" (1990, 186–197). Since translation embodies translators' cultural and social makeups, the way we approach

translation, I propose, needs to be reflective of human diversity and to acknowledge the disruption, decentralization, and voids that may exist in its network(s) of circulation.

A theoretical framework that accounts for heterogeneity both in terms of predictability and in terms of variations and quirks, without reducing translation either to text, society, or culture only, is therefore most desirable. The growing mobility of people and the increasing popularity of digital media permanently create new realities that morph all aspects of our existence, including the way translators engage with literary texts and their authors. This essay proposes a complexity thinking informed approach to literary translators' agency that promises to produce more punctual information on their actions and on their position within the wider corpus, which would eventually translate into more general conclusions. This research is thus modeled according to a bottom-up approach that feeds itself from incoming data on Romanian translations of contemporary American poetry between 2007 and 2017 to form a perception of how agency pans out in this specific context, rather than a top-bottom approach, which assumes unity *a priori*. In terms of methodology, it joins computational social network analysis as a cartographic and quantitative model (commonly referred to as "distant reading") and the close reading of paratexts and of other materials surrounding the publication of the translations. In doing so, it strives to avoid the traditional polarized center-periphery stance and proposes a complexity-based theoretical framework that places translators in the limelight.

Section 1 ("Agency: Complexity Thinking as Context and Network Science as Means") provides an overview of agency in complexity thinking-informed translation scholarship and argues for using the language of network science, providing a description of the proposed mixed-method approach and of the language behind it. Then, section 2 ("Transnational Translation-Based Literary Barters") conceptualizes the notion of literary barter and examines it in relation to randomness and the notion of system self-regulation. Finally, section 3 ("A Computational Sampling of a Romanian Translation Sub-System") illustrates all these with a case study of quantitatively and qualitatively relevant Romanian translations of contemporary American and Canadian poetry in periodicals that have been engendered by a barter economy of cultural exchanges.

1. Agency: Complexity Thinking as Context and Network Science as Means

In *Translation Theory and Development Study: A Complexity Theory Approach* (2014), Kobus Marais builds on social emergence and complexity theory in order to provide a complexity framework for further developments in the field of translation. This contribution and the following ones (Marais and Meylaerts 2018; Meylaerts and Marais 2021) mark a clear shift from the reductionist, genealogic and functionalist mode of thinking about translation, proposing instead a stance that is able to embrace paradoxical perspectives. One of the main aspects that begs for renewed approaches under the complexity paradigm is the issue of agency, which gives complex systems their diverse nature and is a direct result of non-linearity and the emergence of social reality. Marais rightfully questions the traditional link between agency and causality in TS and rather places the agent in a continuous tension with the system, challenging us to problematize agency by taking into account things like “self-organization and unintended consequences” (2014, 95), as well as the lack of any “particular intent” (ibid.).

Before complexity thinking, the multifarious nature of literary translation and the role of translators were prominent in the sociology of translation. The most recent theory applied to translation by sociology-inclined theorists has been Luhmann’s Systems Theory. The notion of *system* gained ground in the nineteenth century through the work of physicist Nicolas Carnot in the field of thermodynamics, and in the twentieth century the concept gained prominence due to the General Systems Theory advanced by biologist Ludwig von Bertalanffy (1988). According to a more recent definition proposed by biologist Ernst Mayr, systems are animated by two properties: homogeneity and emergence (1988, 15). They are also essentially hierarchic, distinct from the environment around them, and may be closed or open, the latter allowing interactions with the environment, while the closed ones are characterized by a deterministic model, according to which no random development is possible. These are the kind of systems which lay at the core of Luhmann’s work and which are too restrictive when discussing the complexity of translation. Translation scholars working with the Luhmannian paradigm argued that translation is a sub-system of society (Hermans 2007; Tyulenev 2009, 2011, 2014, among others) and a system in itself: social reality consists of intersemiotic exchanges among human agents, and, therefore, translation is an intersemiotic phenomenon that

builds social realities. In this society, which has “no center and no overarching rationale and narrative” (Hermans 2007, 118), translation is a sub-system that communicates with other systems “in terms of its interference and influence” (Tyulenev 2011, 48). Luhmann’s social systems consist of communication events. In his theory, “systems [are] made up of decisions, and [are] capable of completing the decisions that make them up, through the decisions that make them up” (Luhmann 2003, 32). Furthermore, besides communication, Luhmann’s definition of social system is also based on the concept of *autopoiesis* (1995, 408), or self-creation, which radicalizes otherness: his notion of “soft” complexity is articulated around the concept of “complexity of operations,” that is, the number of possible relations between the constituents of a certain system exceeds the number of actual relationships that will happen in the said system. This form of organization is essentially different from Chilean biologist Humberto Maturana’s organicist definition, according to which the participation of components and the relationships between components is instrumental for the unit (1975, 315). Luhmann’s systems theory was not articulated around human beings, but only around their communication acts, so perhaps, I suggest, they are not a suitable paradigm to account for translators’ agency:

Just imagine for a moment a social system that is, in actual fact, functioning autopoietically...This would entail that every single process taking place within this system would necessarily be subservient to the maintenance of the autopoiesis of the whole. Consequently, the individuals...would vanish. They would have to subordinate themselves to the maintenance of autopoiesis. Their faith is of no further relevance...This kind of negation of the individual is among the characteristics of totalitarian systems. (Maturana and Poerksen 2007, 72)

Luhmann’s view of complexity is thus essentially reductionist, because the complexity of operations entails selection and because he does not seem to acknowledge the existence of systemic unpredictability.

In explaining why Luhmann is (not) suitable in TS, Tyulenev (2009) notes that there are two kinds of complexity: incomprehensible complexity (arising from connecting everything with everything else) and determinately structured complexity, which means a “reduction of complexity [that] is inevitable in system formation” (148). In Luhmann’s systems theory, systems are separated from the environment by a boundary, which means “applying a difference schema to an

incomprehensible complexity” (Tyulevlev 2009, 148). The underpinning tenet of all this is that social systems are cohesive both in terms of interests and in terms of agents and that they are loyal to only one system. Luhmann only acknowledges the differences that arise between systems (what makes one system different from another) and the difference between a system and the environment, but he does not fully address the problem of the differences arising between units in the same system—that is, the problem of heterogeneity. Luhmann’s difference is contained within the system and is a condition of the system’s self-referentiality and closure. Another shortcoming I would like to address is Luhmann’s *organized complexity* as a result of autopoiesis and selection. For our purpose, this organized complexity simply rules out the existence of chaotic behaviors through autopoiesis, as well as the reality of translators that do not have the conscience of their agency. Furthermore, the separation of the translation system from the environment in Luhmann’s theory fails to address clearly the issue of translator’s multiple dependencies (or loyalties), alongside the influence of the technoscape on the work of translators, to name only two such shortcomings. Diminishing the importance of the so-called “incomprehensible complexity” and, thus, overlooking the relationships translators have outside of a translation sub-system, leads to a limited understanding of how literary translators work. Furthermore, in defining society, Tyulenev limits “the pillars of modern society” (2014, 9) to Gidden’s transformation (the French Revolution, the scientific revolution, and the industrial revolution), without alluding to the digital revolution of the 1990s and to the increasing prominence of this new type of cultural interaction ever since. Tyulenev’s essentially humanistic profile also has an impact on the series of quantitative and qualitative measures he proposes, which are all borrowed from sociology. Last but not least, he uses Luhmann in his own work to account for large-scale phenomena like the Westernization of Russia, a context in which a homogenous systemic mode of thinking makes scholarly sense.

Dealing with heterogeneity as a key driving force in social worlds may be what makes the notion of complex adaptive systems interesting to Kobus Marais (2014) in the field of translation, alongside their capacity to prove that horizontally-distributed agents, be they individuals or institutions, can be just as effective in certain contexts as hierarchical agents can be in others. The complexity of the translation system at the level of agent-based modeling is given by the dynamics of the system, agent interaction, and agent heterogeneity. Unlike traditional social sciences, which are focused on the social average, the analysis and

modeling of such systems promise to offer a more complete image of translators' actions, which may range from chaotic behaviors to assumed, intentional agency. Complex systems are a subset of non-linear dynamic systems and have been best and most extensively applied to the study of society, as they were found to account for the heterogeneity of the agents and for their emergent behavior, as well as for phase transitions in social environments. They are self-organizing, dynamic, and built on positive feedback (contained in the notion of "feedback loops"); they evolve from simplicity to greater complexity and are sensitive to the smallest change in the initial conditions, which can lead to unpredictable outputs. Such systems have been successfully deployed in the study of complex situations that arise in various social systems, such as healthcare (Lipsitz 2012) and international relations (Mathias et al. 2010), because of their potential to solve problems for which traditional, hierarchical forms of control and negative feedback are ineffective.

Very importantly, complex systems theory and systems thinking in general offer a unique vantage point from a methodological point of view, since it offers tools that social systems theory does not. Complexity scientists work with the non-linear modeling of complex systems, which is best achieved using network theory and network analysis (Sayama 2015). Network models have gained traction because they are data-intensive and allow for the non-homogeneous connectivity of their elements. In other words, some elements of the network may be very well connected, while others may be disconnected. They also give the model "greater power to represent connections among system components more closely with reality" (ibid., 296), which makes them extremely useful in rendering the topology and evolution of real-life systems. The workings of real-world complex systems are rendered by generative network models, in which one may add or drop components, which result in the growth or decay of the respective system. All these network affordances have marked a huge leap in the study of such systems, whose evolution over time was much more difficult to properly describe using traditional models based on phase space.

The present essay endeavors to present only a small slice of the literary translation system in Romania. Let us agree to call it the sub-system of the poetry translation in periodicals and to model it as a network using the NetworkX library in Python. The 310 *nodes* are various American and Canadian contemporary poets and their Romanian translators. They are linked by *edges*, which represent the publication venue of the respective translation. The weight of an edge is one or greater

than one, according to the number of times an author was translated in the same periodical. If an author was translated by two or more translators, the translator-nodes are linked to the same author-node. The number of links a node has is reflected by the notions of *degree* (a translator linked to six authors will have a degree of six) and of *average degree* (the average number of links per node within the entire network). The analysis of the network will be focused on three additional measurements, called *centralities*, which indicate the most prominent nodes in a graph from three different angles. First, *betweenness centrality* points at nodes that are not necessarily well connected, but are strategically positioned and may easily broker between groups based on the number of shortest paths that go through them. Second, *closeness centrality* indicates nodes that are able to spread the information quickly in the network: they do not have many direct links, but they are still close enough to many of the network's nodes. Third, the *EigenVector centrality* identifies the most prominent nodes in the network on the grounds of the number of the links they have (degree) and of the degree of the nodes they are connected to. A node with many links to other well-connected nodes will have a higher Eigenvector than should it be linked to other nodes with less links.

During the analysis of this network we will zoom in on the translator-nodes associated to the idea of literary barter, described in the next section. To the measurements mentioned before (based on bibliographic information), we will add further details via traditional descriptive methods (or, close reading), factoring in the idea of randomness in relation to causality. How much of what we traditionally ascribe to well-defined literary systems is simply a random act of translation?

2. Transnational Translation-Based Literary Barters

As I have argued in previous research, most contemporary poetry translations in Romania are happenstances, instances of cultural transfers that are not part of a pattern and are unlikely to replicate (Tanasescu 2021). Some of them are completely random, where randomness is understood as “perfect unpredictability” (Byrne and Callaghan 2014, 20), while others may be attributed to chaotic processes in the overall literary system. The difference between the former and the latter resides in the fact that the latter could still be predicted, although the extremely complex information that surrounds the translation makes the prediction extremely difficult (Hayles 1991, 1). Such an example of chaotic process in relation to translation are literary barters, especially in transnational contexts.

“Translation by its very nature is transnational; it embodies intercultural exchange.” This is one of the key statements that open a relatively recent book on the circulation and transmission of texts across languages as an enriching, productive process (Nelson and Maher 2013, 5). Besides the very transnational nature of any translation act, increasing connectivity and the receding economic and sociologic significance of national borders beg the adoption of a transnational perspective that fosters the inclusion of translation projects happening across linguistic boundaries. Translators who travel past national borders or who choose to emigrate oftentimes have publishing initiatives that link the spaces they inhabit or visit with their homeland and thus they take part in the global information flow. They also become small-scale actors on the stage of cultural diplomacy. They may even use translation as valuable currency for gaining literary prominence in the new space of adoption. In order to capture the complexity and liminality of such encounters, one needs to look at both the state and the non-state actors that contribute to the realization of such translation projects, alongside the unique sets of conditions that trigger these exchanges. Discussing Page and Miller’s claim that complexity is interested in a state between stasis and chaos, control and anarchy, particularity and universality, Marais argues, quoting Latour, that complexity thinking is also keen on analyzing the in-between “as an action, a verb, a movement” (2014, 25), thus it is interested just as much in “in-betweening”—in “borders, hybridity, and the effect of a reorganization of the same substrata” (Marais 2014, 25). Transnationalism is particularly well suited for treatment within a chaos paradigm. Cultural hybridity as a dynamic site of cultural production requires a new framework to account not only for the heterolingualism or the plurivocality of translation, but also for unconventional and non-hierarchical relationships between the “original” and the translation, and between translators and authors (Bandia 2014).

In describing the agency of translators working in a certain language—in this case, the Romanian—a transnational backdrop should gain, I suggest, more and more currency and salience. Since the anti-communist revolution and, more acutely, since it joined the European Union in 2007, Romania has experienced a massive phenomenon of migration, which peaked in 2015 and placed the country second in the world after Syria in terms of displaced workforce.¹ However, referring to transnationalism only in relation to migration would be short sighted. As Aleida Assmann (2017) notes, “transnational” bears no less than four meanings: first, non-state actors that operate in different countries;

second, geopolitical units comprising different nations (e.g. the European Union); third, the impact of media beyond local and national frameworks; and fourth, “individuals and groups that move in space either voluntarily or under political or social pressure, while retaining and reconstructing within and among themselves a diasporic connection to their former homelands” (66). Indeed, many of the Romanian migrants are writers, for whom translation is a way to keep themselves plugged, or re-territorialized, in the Romanian literary world, as well as a way to help Romanian writers “spill” over the national borders and make their work known internationally via translation. Eastern European poetry after communism was qualified by Andrew Wachtel as the New Internationalism (2006), according to which “the writer moves beyond nationalism to refine and expand a sense of national identity in an increasingly transnational world” (Woodside 2014) in order to remain relevant. Furthermore, besides immigrant writers there are writers and translators that are often on the move, engaged in academic mobility projects, who borrow practices and concepts from other cultures and from new types of communities (such as the digital ones) and applying them to their own, fostering new collaborations and initiatives. The latter phenomenon is classified by Moira Inghilleri (2016) as a transnationalism of the elites, animated by a cosmopolitan freedom, which should be distinguished from the hybridity that characterizes migration. She describes cosmopolitan spaces as difficult to pin down, as contact is limited or even virtual and “there is an expectation of a more reflective connection to the other” (Inghilleri 2016, 198).

Complex adaptive systems appear as particularly suited to deal with non-linearity and diversity as they allow for the existence of *flows*—“from node to node via a connector with the nodes acting as agents and the connectors as possible interactions” (Marais 2014, 33). In a transnational context, the two nodes engaged in a literary barter belong in different cultures and the flows between those cultures are bidirectional, which makes the issue of cultural hegemony even more problematic. Moreover, one of the most important features of complex adaptive systems is self-organization. As Marais notes, “agents act locally, with no view of contributing to the whole” (2014, 31) and the whole emerges from such local interactions. Literary barter is such instances of such self-organization, during which agents do not focus primarily on their contribution to the whole, but on more immediate and more personal gains, which may or may not lead to other developments in the longer run. If we consider translation as filling a gap in a culture rather than

...translating poetry, just like composing poetry, has been celebrated as a kind of writing that allows the translator to find his or her language through that of another (“it spoke the same idiom that I was looking for in my contemporaries in my own language” [Aulicino 1988, 27]). Praising and preserving elements of the other is, ultimately, *a way of defining oneself*. (Galvin 2014, 372, emphasis mine)

In the case presented here, what cannot be found in local contemporary authors is sought “in the company of strangers” (Cronin 2014, 213). The description of this phenomenon cannot be primarily based on economic factors, but needs to consider self-organization.³

An equally essential feature is that complex systems do not operate in a state of equilibrium, as that would mean their extinction. Instead, they live “*at the edge of chaos*,” a state in between order and chaos. It is at the edge of chaos that complex systems manifest their self-organized criticality,⁴ tuning themselves to critical states through active, decentralized processes (Bak et al. 1988). As we will see in the following section, apparently “minor” literary exchanges have led to mainstream publication events, which may not have otherwise happened. Finally, the behavior of a complex adaptive system can be predicted only by observation, because non-linearity makes prediction almost impossible (see Mitchell 2009, 20 *ff.*).⁵ The notion of literary translation barter adds an extra dimension to the impossibility of prediction to the system’s evolution: the difficulty related to identifying a translation act as an exchange carried out for the benefit of each agent involved. This is exactly where the mixed-method approach, combining distant reading and close reading, proves particularly effective.

3. A Computational Sampling of a Romanian Translation Sub-System

In a PhD dissertation on the dialogue between French and American poetries since 1970, Matthew Bingham Smith (2015) discusses the convoluted web of poets that contributed decisively, through their own networks of friends, trips abroad, and poetry readings, to establishing a whole set of practices at the institutional level. The work poets began was picked up and furthered by more formal modes of organization, such as national literary magazines or presses with national distribution, thus embedding translations of such poetries, for example, into a more

centralized network of circulation. Although poets (and poet-translators) have maintained their salient role in imagining and creating competing audiences through poetry readings and have been largely influencing writing practices, the mediation of the exchange between the two cultures has become more institutionalized over time. Unlike in France, to whose practices Romania might appear as tributary, the exchanges with American or Canadian cultures have never become institutional, with the notable exception of the US Department of State-run financing programs in place at the US embassy in Bucharest.⁶ The work translators have been doing on such translations in periodicals has remained their own project and has not joined a centralized distribution network, but stayed rather local, according to the audience of the respective journal and to the translators' networks. Nevertheless, their agency is of the utmost importance for the presence of these poetries in Romania. For example, in the case of Allen Ginsberg: compared to France, a book market forty-six times larger than Romania, where he was translated twenty-three times in anthologies and twenty-seven times in periodicals between 1960 and 1994 (Morgan 1996), in Romania he was translated only six times in anthologies, never in a volume,⁷ but almost equally in periodicals: twenty-seven times between 1965 and 1993 (*ibid.*).

Romanian writers have long been involved in literary projects that cross national boundaries (Tanasescu 2019). While there has not been a coherent translation-oriented institutional program in place, the number of such translation projects is far from being negligible and reflects Romanian writers' interest in establishing and developing relationships with their foreign peers. The beginning of the diplomatic relations between Romania and the United States was immediately followed by a slew of translation projects by various Romanian scholars that benefited from the new academic mobility. The tradition continued until the Second World War, and gained a new impetus during the 1970s and 1980s, when many Romanian writers either emigrated or asked for political asylum. After 1989, migration, the free movement of people, and academic mobility intensified exponentially and many transnational translation projects have been simply the result of interpersonal networks. This section examines several translation events occasioned by exiled or immigrant poets in the wider context of transnationalism. Figure 1 presents the network of translations in print periodicals, a highly disconnected graph, with an extremely low density (0.0224), average degree (1.931), and clustering coefficient (0.1755). The main component (G0) displays significantly

higher values for the average degree (2.3809) and a weighted average degree of 2.9523, a result of multiple authors translated by translators in G0 and of multiple selections of the same author's poetry published by poets in G0 compared to all the other components.

Figure 2 shows translations resulting from transnational and academia-related initiatives, as well as from scholarly research and academic mobility, with the nodes being authors and translators and the links being the literary journals in which they were published. The percentage of poetry translation in print periodicals, 27.9%,⁸ is the result of transnational connections (87 nodes out of 310).

Out of these, almost half (42 nodes) pertain to the main component (Figure 3), formed by translators C. Tanasescu, N. Cassian, C. Firan, A. Carides, R. Hotăranu, and I. Ieronim and their thirty-six translated authors. G0 in Figure 2 presents four critical nodes in terms of connectedness: poets Stanley Moss and J. Ashbery, who, through occasional translator N. Cassian, connect translators C. Tanasescu and R. Tanasescu to translators around the literary journal *Scrisul Românesc*; and authors M. Woodside and A. Gritsman, who connect the same translators back to *Scrisul Românesc* (translators R. Hotăranu, A. Carides, and C. Firan) through translator I. Ieronim. These links show that authors and translators are equally important in terms of network connectedness and that the disappearance of any two of these nodes may lead to further heterogeneity and even to the collapse of the whole network. Furthermore, these translation acts are classical examples of happenstances (Tanasescu 2021)—cultural transfers that take place mostly due to chance—which would likely be discarded in any systemic account of Romanian translations from the US literature. And yet, as we shall see, they have been essential in holding the network together and have created positive feedback loops that occasioned further translations from American poets by other translators in periodicals and stand-alone volumes.

The example of literary translation barter that I focus on in this paper are the occasional transnational translators around *Scrisul Românesc*. Nan Z. Da explains that “in occasional transnationalism, the literature or literary practices of the other are cited to enable a thought experiment or a political enunciation and are then set aside” (2014, vii). Occasional transnationalism is thus an alternative mode of encounter in which none of the parties involved takes any kind of action, but uses the image of the other as an essential part of a poetics of recognition. In transnational translation, the poetics of recognition plays an at least equally important

role: the translation of the other makes certain immediate and private possibilities more likely, and intimation of prospective gains through literary barbers becomes a much more enticing goal than “simple” cultural cross-fertilization. Unlike occasional transnationalism, what I call “in-kind transnationalism” is very much based on a theory of social action that draws on motives, ends, purposes, and means.

The second anthology of American poetry ever translated into Romanian is *Locul nimănui. Antologie de poezie americană contemporană. 36 de poeți americani contemporani* (Naming the Nameless. An Anthology of Contemporary American Poetry: 36 Contemporary American Poets), a project managed and coordinated by New York City-based Carmen Firan and Paul Doru Mugur; it was part of a publishing agreement between an American press, Talisman House Publishers, and a Romanian one, Cartea Românească. According to this agreement, two anthologies, one of American poetry, and one of Romanian poetry (Firan and Mugur 2006) were to be published concomitantly in the two countries. Firan—also a former program director at the Romanian Cultural Institute in New York and, as we already know, daughter of the *Scrisul Românesc* founder, and Mugur—a doctor and writer—were the Romanian coordinators of the two projects; they commissioned a team of Romanian translators who mostly lived, at least at that time, in North America: Adrian Sângeorzan and Liviu Georgescu—both poets and physicians living in the New Jersey area; Ileana Orlich—professor of Romanian and English at Arizona State University; the late Sanda Agalidi—a long-time Romanian émigré who co-edited, together with Julian Semilian, the first translation into English of Paul Celan’s *Romanian Poems* (2003); and Alina Savin—a translator residing in New Zealand, who also worked on the Romanian renditions of Henri Béhar’s monograph (2005) on Tristan Tzara.

Although two institutions were involved in these projects, it is not clear who was the initiator, but they may have both originated in the network Firan developed during her tenure at the Romanian Cultural Institute. What is of interest here is the extent to which she was personally involved in the creation and circulation of the book and what kind of relationships this anthology prompted. Firan states in interviews that Mugur and herself did more than coordinate the publication, as they were equally involved in the promotion and distribution of the books (Zubașcu 2008). Moreover, neither the Romanian anthology nor the American one benefitted from financial support from the Romanian Cultural Institute in New York: in a public statement (Tapiserii și foi întoarse 2007) the officials listed the

Romanian translation among the projects that received support for its promotion only.

The selection of the pieces to be included in the anthology was made by two American poets, also based in New York City, whose own work is among the pieces selected: Edward Foster, professor of creative writing and director of Talisman House Publishers, and Leonard Schwartz, host of the *Cross Cultural Poetics* radio show and editor of a volume of selected poems in English translation by Romanian iconic avant-garde poet Benjamin Fondane (2016). The rationale behind the selection of authors is clearly explained from the get-go: “to present voices that are original, strong (and sometime unconventional or ‘politically incorrect’) and that defy the prejudices in the industry of fame and prizes in such a vast and varied culture such as the American one” (Firan and Mugar 2006, 5). However ambitious the objective, the anthology received very little attention in Romania. Poet Claudiu Komartin very briefly mentions it in his blog as “a flimsy book” that makes you think “there’s something really off about American poets” (2011), while others cannot seem to decide whether the book is “a defective success [or] a generous failure” (Ștefan 2008). Firan herself admits in an interview that many of the authors included in the anthology published in Romania gave her quite a few literary “headaches” (Zubașcu 2008, 216).

The whole project seems to have the air of a “family affair” for Carmen Firan, a Romanian poet and translator-turned-hypnotherapist in New York City since 2002 (Zubașcu 2008), for which she rewarded the American collaborators with further translations into Romanian of their work: poetry selections of Andrei Codrescu (2008)—who wrote one of the blurbs for the anthology⁹—and of Edward Foster (2008)—the project’s editor and publisher—appear in 2008 in *Scrisul Românesc*, a Romanian literary journal in the southern city of Craiova managed by her own father, Florea Firan. As a matter of fact, much of Firan’s publishing activity in Romanian revolves around this journal and its affiliated press. It is there that she publishes a selection of Stanley Moss’s poetry (Moss 2009), alongside the above-mentioned translation of the same poet by her close friend, Nina Cassian. Furthermore, other American writers with whom Firan has been collaborating since her arrival in the United States get to travel to Romania and be translated and published there in bilingual volumes. This is the case of Richard Milazzo (2010 and 2012a), Edward Foster (2009), and Edward Hirsch (2014b). The latter had published the

volume titled *Romanian Writers on Writing*, edited by emigré-writer Norman Manea (Manea 2011), and traveled to Romania on the occasion of his own book in translation being launched at the International Literary Festival in Iași in 2014. There he sealed another translation agreement, this time with mainstream Polirom Press, for a different poetry volume, *Focul viu. Poeme vechi și noi* (The Living Fire. New and Selected Poems) (Hirsch 2017) and with the Al. I. Cuza University Press for a volume of prose (Hirsch 2015), co-translated by American literature professors Radu Andriescu and Dana Bădulescu. Besides these poetry translations in book form, many journal selections were contributed to by people affiliated with *Scrisul Românesc*: Răzvan Hotăranu, Carmen Firan's son and a car dealer in New York City, translated various poems by Ralph Angel (2010 and 2015), Joy Manesiotis (2010), Dave Brinks (2010), Barbara Ras (2012), and Andrey Gritsman (2014). Gritsman, a Russian poet and translator who works as a physician in the New York City area, had a poetry book of his own (Gritsman 2004) translated into Romanian by Firan's stepdaughter, Doris Sângeorzan, and consequently collaborated with Firan on an anthology of American poets of recent foreign extraction in the late 2000s (Gritsman 2008). Gritsman is also the founder of the online poetry journal *Interpoezia*, where Firan collaborates as an international editor, and is also the initiator and patron of the International Poetry Reading Series at the popular Cornelia Street Café in New York City, which hosts periodic readings featuring Firan. Going back to *Scrisul Românesc*, the journal hosts further selections from Hirsch (2012, 2013, and 2014a) and Milazzo (2012b), translated by Hotăranu; Alexandra Carides—an oncologist and a translator based in Philadelphia—translates more Milazzo (2014), alongside Elinor Nauen (2008), and Robert Hershon (2008). These are only a few examples of a literary trade between Romania and New York that has been taking place ever since Carmen Firan emigrated in 2000,¹⁰ a fact confirmed by her father in an interview:

I need to emphasize the impulse and the help received from Carmen Firan and Adrian Sângeorzan: not only through the publication of their own work in our journal and with our press, but also by their commissioning American writers or Romanian writers in America, (...) a cultural bridge that has been in place for over 12 years. (Jianu 2014)

This cultural bridge appears to be essential for the sometimes-dusty journal: in a review run by the parent literary association, a contributor

criticizes the conformism and provincialism of the content and says that the only chance of the readers at quality content is to look for the Americans, concluding that the Americans are indeed present (Cronicar 2007).

The translators and authors revolving around *Scrisul Românesc* are generally placed well in the transnational graph: fourth in terms of betweenness centrality (R. Hotaranu, $bc = 0.0663$, rank 4), but lower in terms of closeness and EigenVector values. That shows us they actually owe their ranking to other nodes in the network, notably Ioana Ieronim—through her translation of A. Gritsman (also translated by R. Hotăranu), as well as because of her translation of M. Woodside, which connects her to C. Tanasescu, the highest placed in terms of centrality and with the highest average degree in the whole translation network. Ieronim's connection to C. Tanasescu and the co-translation done by Nina Cassian with C. Firan are the links which confer the network its connectedness: had these links not been present, the *Scrisul Românesc* clique¹¹ would have been disconnected.

4. Conclusion

Such exchanges offer a vista foregrounded in an economy of literary barter, characterized by in-kind exchanges that energize the dialogue between contemporary poets and their translators. With the fallout of the 2008 recession still lingering in a country in which poetry is published in print runs equal to those in the United States, but does not sell, an exchange economy goes off well. Translation becomes more and more a benefit in-kind and generates new kinds of partnerships, events, and literary associations that not only maintain and strengthen networks, but also extend them. The interpersonal relationships that result from and create these exchanges are salient and their multifarious nature occasion new roles for translators. As Jones rightfully notes, “translators often carry less power in a production network than an anthology/journal editor or a living source poet” (2009, 301). This is precisely why poet-translators take on new challenges and assume new roles in the production chain. The gain is so much more substantial if the services they render in their home culture are mirrored in the source culture by services benefiting their own work. Transnational poet-translators do not play a twin role (*ibid.*), but a triple one: besides being converters of a text and representatives of a source-language culture or poet, they are

also particularly effective publishing facilitators. The downside of this new reality is the localism of many translation projects, as an exchange economy does not always involve major players on the book market.

However, as Edward Foster notes in the presentation of *Naming the Nameless*, “even the most modest of attempts that may look like no more than tiny drops in the ocean are still to be preferred to laments and complexes, myths, and prejudices” (2006, 7). The quantitative analysis demonstrated that transnational literary barters actually account for almost a third of the overall network (28%), which is far from being quantitatively marginal. What our case study suggests is that not only do occasional, even random, translations exist, but they also may prove essential for the robustness of a translation network. They have been instrumental in holding an otherwise disconnected network together and, although difficult to predict accurately, they may continue to do so. The close reading of the materials surrounding these translations clearly disclosed that many of the transfers in the translation flows started as barters, but led to other exchanges in the so-called mainstream publishing industry. Such a progenerative perspective, concerned with the dynamics of real-world relationships and backed by a politics of fecundity, is to be preferred, I offer, to sparse major-league translation phenomena or to homogenizing systemic perspectives that miss the essential complications of agency. More importantly, a complexity-theory informed approach to translation will never consider such events as isolated, but rather as building blocks of a system that has yet to prove its robustness beyond the said mainstream translations and agents. It is only by adopting a mixed-method approach, or by “closely reading distant reading” (Liu 2020), that one can account for each literary translator’s work and its significance in any given cultural system. And it is the task of computational approaches to makes sense of organizational complexity and our task as humanities scholars to add layers of meaning and unveil the extent and the effects of translators’ agency at all levels.

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Notes

- 1 According to the United Nation's *International Migration Report 2015* released in 2016, p. 19. <http://bit.ly/2B4utmZ>.
- 2 It is necessary to note at this point that I do not have a positivist attitude towards copyright, nor do I entertain the author's hegemony in relation to translation. For the purpose of this research, the way I see the relationship between translation and the original echoes the mathematical operation of translation, in which the original is a pre-image, and the translation is considered to be the image. What may appear as the author's hegemony in relation to their translators is simply a manifestation of literary kinship.
- 3 Latour (1996) gives the example of J.P. Dupuy's *Introduction aux sciences sociales. Logique des phénomènes collectifs* (Introduction to social science. The logic of collective phenomena) (Paris: Editions Marketing, 1992) for a classical use of the biological self-organization metaphor instead of economics.
- 4 Conceptually illustrated by the Bak-Tang-Wiesenfeld sandpile model, self-organized criticality is a process by which "many composite systems naturally evolve to a critical state in which a minor event starts a chain reaction that can affect any number of elements in that system" (Bak and Chen 1991, 46–53). Later on Bak hypothesized that self-organizing criticality is a universal phenomenon that applies to complex systems in general and not only to the complex adaptive ones.
- 5 As Marais rightfully notes, the impossibility of predicting behavior renders causality very problematic.
- 6 The financial support they offer is only for projects that result in a book being published.
- 7 Before the only translation ever published in a stand-alone collection by Polirom Press in 2010.
- 8 The corpus presented in these visualizations includes all the translations published in print periodicals by transnational translators and do not include the anthology that I describe in this section.
- 9 The relationship between Firan and Codrescu cannot be reduced to these exchanges. In 2005, Scrisul Românesc Press had published Codrescu's only poetry collection ever written in Romanian—*Instrumentul negru. Poezii, 1965–1968* [The black instrument. Poems, 1965–1968]—part of a series of concerted efforts by Romanian writers to bring his work back in his home culture.

- 10 The exact date of her relocation is not clear: either sometime in the late 1990s or in 2000.
- 11 *Clique* in graph theory is a basic term referring to a subset of vertices of an undirected graph such that every two distinct vertices in the clique are adjacent. I have used it in this context to emphasize the tightly-knit network that revolves around *Scrisul Românesc*.

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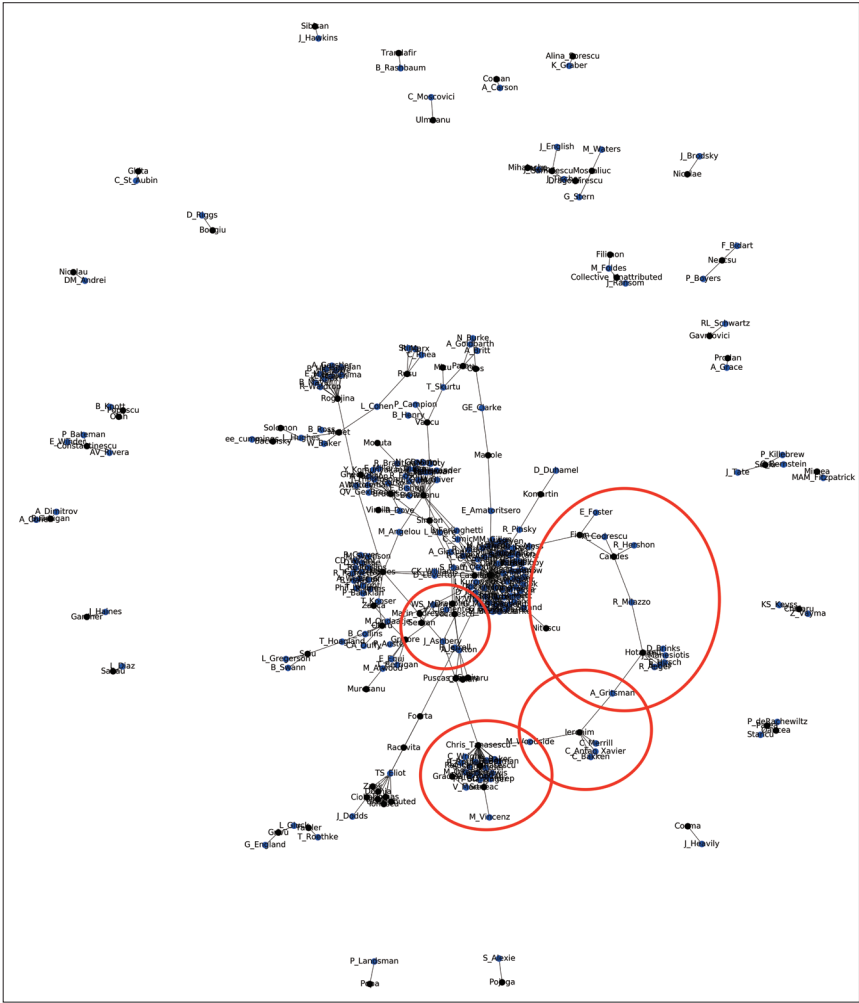
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Figure 1. Romanian Translations of American and Canadian English-Language Poetry in Print Periodicals (2007–2017)



Note: The red circles mark the position of the nodes in the case studies.

Figure 2. Transnational and Academia-Related Translations in Print Periodicals (G0 to G11)

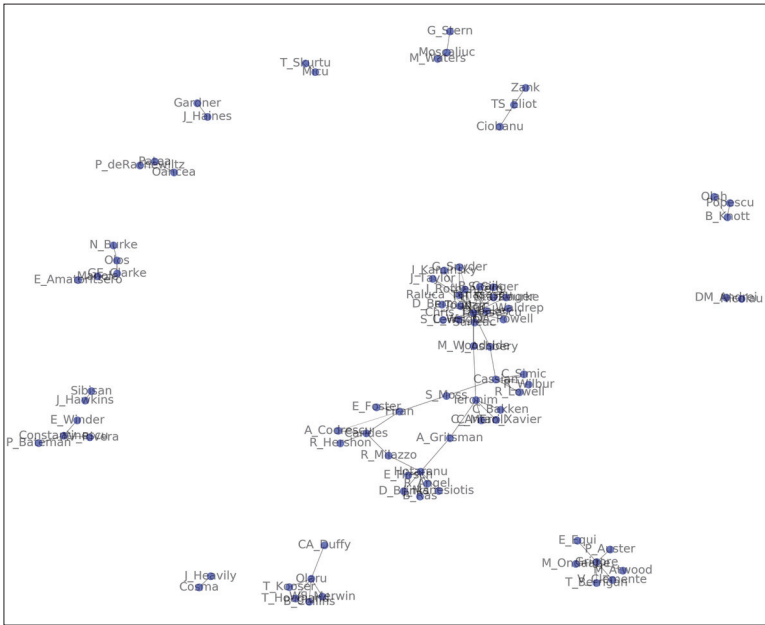


Figure 3. Transnational and Academia-Related Translations in Print Periodicals (2007–2017)—Main Component (G0)

