

ROMANIAN LITERATURE IN BRITISH TRANSLATION PRIZES

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Abstract: As a component of a larger project on translation awards, this article examines the presence of literary works originally written in Romanian in recent iterations of four prominent British prizes for literary translation: the EBRD Literature Prize, the Warwick Prize for Women in Translation, the International Booker Prize, and the Oxford-Weidenfeld Prize. Noting that Romanian is the official language in both Romania and Moldova, the article opens by outlining the necessary linguistic, literary, and sociohistorical background, before moving to the British context by presenting the framework and scope regarding the four selected literary translation awards. After scrutinising the longlists, shortlists, and winners of the awards to determine the presence of translated Romanian-language works, the analysis is discussed and then briefly compared with some of the project's other findings.

Keywords: Romanian literature; Moldovan literature; literary translation prizes; literary translation in the United Kingdom; Romanian-English translation

1. Introduction

In 2024, the prestigious Dublin Literary Award – one of the world's best-known annual literary prizes – was given to a translated work of Romanian literature for the first time (O'Donaghue 2024). The book in question was *Solenoid*, by the author, literary critic, and academic Mircea Cărtărescu, the original of which was published in Romania in 2015. The work was translated into English by Sean Cotter, and it was this translation which was recognised by the Dublin Literary Award, one of the most well-endowed global translation prizes in financial terms. And though the Award is of course based in the Republic of Ireland, the visibility that came with Cărtărescu's victory also garnered the attention of media elsewhere, including in the neighbouring United Kingdom (for example, see Creamer 2024).

As part of the author's ongoing broad-based study delving into the presence and role of a range of smaller literatures and cultures in selected British literary translation awards and prizes, it was decided to briefly chart the presence of Romanian literature in the longlists, shortlists, and prize-winners of four major awards recognising

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excellence in literary translation into English. As will be presented in further detail later, these prizes comprise (by reverse chronological order of the year of the first award in their current format): the EBRD Literature Prize (2018); the Warwick Prize for Women in Translation (2017); the International Booker Prize (relaunched in 2016); and the Oxford-Weidenfeld Prize (1999). This study takes a similar approach to the author's previous works linked to the topic.¹ Among others, these have included a profile tracing the specific case of translated Polish works in the same four prizes (Hoyte-West 2024a), as well as using the 2023 International Booker Prize victory for Georgi Gospodinov's novel *Time Shelter* [Времеубежище] (translated by Angela Rodel) as a starting point to ascertain the trajectory of translated Bulgarian literature in same four awards which are analysed in this article (Hoyte-West 2024b).

As with the current article, the choice of these selected case studies was motivated by the author's research interests in the languages and cultures concerned. In this vein, and focusing on the particular instances of the four selected British translation prizes, this profile also aims to provide an exploratory overview of shortlisted and prizewinning literature originally written in Romanian by authors from Romania and Moldova. In following the author's aforementioned studies on selected literary translation awards, the chosen methodology is desk-based and qualitative (see Bassot 2022). This involved visiting the websites of the relevant prizes as well as consulting appropriate media resources, focusing on the timescale from the year 2017 onwards as the temporal frame for the present analysis.

2. Some Brief Remarks on Romanian Language and Culture

As the national language of the two neighbouring southeastern European nations of Romania and Moldova, Romanian is a member of the Romance language sub-family within the Indo-European languages. In terms of its geographical concentration, it is perhaps notable for being a linguistic island amid a sea of languages from other linguistic families and sub-families, notably Hungarian as well as Slavic and other languages. As with many Balkan languages, the grammar and lexis of Romanian displays evidence of contact between speakers of these different tongues (Sala and Posner 2025). The rich history and culture of the Romanian language and its literature has already been covered extensively elsewhere, including in a recent edited volume on *Romanian Literature as World Literature* (Moraru & Terian 2017). Therefore, this section of this study will only mention a short selection of salient points.

When the principalities of Wallachia and Moldavia unified and gained their independence in 1860, after centuries of Ottoman rule, Romanian became the principal language of the new country. At the same time, it was also spoken in parts of the

¹ Though focusing on translated literary works from Romanian into English, the literary-historical focus of this article also aligns with the approach taken by a comprehensive two-volume edited monograph on the history of translations into Romanian during the 20th century (see Constantinescu, Dejica, and Vilceanu 2021, 2022). This is part of a wider project on Romanian translation history headed by Ștefan cel Mare University of Suceava in association with almost two dozen institutional partners - for more information, please see: <https://itlr.usv.ro/>.

Habsburg-ruled lands, including in Transylvania and in the crownland of Bukovina (see Kamusella 2009: 207-211). After 1918, Romania was expanded by the incorporation of those former Habsburg territories, as well as the former Russian-ruled Bessarabia. During World War Two, Romania was to lose part of these territorial gains to the Soviet Union, which incorporated the northern segment of Bukovina into the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic and demarcated Bessarabia as the Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic (Kamusella 2021: 115-117). In the latter, over the ensuing decades, political and ideological reasons underpinned the development of the local variant of Romanian into the Moldovan language, which was written using the Cyrillic alphabet. Under this name, the language lasted up until the end of the Soviet Union and into independent Moldova. Indeed, debates as to the exact name of this language proved enduring; finally, the state language was determined as Romanian and the linguistic designation of Moldovan was definitively consigned to history (for more, see King 1999; Ciscel 2006; Kamusella 2021; Negură & Suveica 2023: 467-470, etc.).

Returning to the Romanian context, the aftermath of World War Two also brought state Communism as the official ideology, a situation which lasted until the overthrow of Nicolae Ceausescu in 1989 (Turnock, Latham, Cucu & Hitchins 2025). Nowadays, with Romania a full member state of the European Union, Romanian has therefore been an official language of that organisation since 2007 (European Union 2025). Most recently, Moldova has also received official candidate status for EU membership (European Commission 2025).

In noting the wealth of linguistic and literary history that the Romanian language embodies, the question of what qualifies as Romanian literature for the purposes of this article should also be briefly treated. As illustrated by various extant works by authors from the early modern era into the 1800s (for example, see Crețu 2017; Dondorici 2023), Romanian was part of the multilingual Balkans of that time. Similarly to other national and ethnolinguistic contexts, the nineteenth century also coincided with the initial blooming of Romanian literature, with great works of poetry, theatre, and literature flowing from the pens of luminaries such as Mihai Eminescu, Ion Luca Caragiale, and others (for example, see Terian 2017), many of whose works have been widely translated. Considerable literary activity continued into the first half of the twentieth century and beyond, with many writers active not only in Romania itself but also abroad (Terian 2015), particularly in interwar and postwar France, where several wrote in French. Nowadays, there is of course a wealth of literary production in Romanian from both Romania and Moldova, as is well-attested by attributes such as the European Union Prize for Literature (see EU Prize for Literature 2025a; 2025b) and other such accolades.

Accordingly, in noting related discussions on the presence of diaspora and minority writers (for example, see Ung 2021), it must also be remembered that both countries are also home to other ethnic and linguistic communities. This includes speakers of languages such as Hungarian, German, and Polish in the case of Romania, and of Russian and Gagauz in Moldova (for a full list, see Council of Europe 2023; Manole 2021). By way of example, instances of prominent writers from the area writing in other languages include the Bukovina-born Paul Celan, Gregor von Rezzori, and Rose Ausländer (see Hirano 2023; Lajarrige 2023; Reichert 2023), who all wrote principally

in German as does the internationally-acclaimed and 2009 Nobel laureate Herta Müller (The Nobel Prize 2025). Yet, though acknowledging the diversity of languages and cultures present in both Romanian and Moldova, this study – similarly to the author’s previous work on Polish literature in British translation awards (Hoyte-West 2024a) – takes a more streamlined definition – i.e., through a more limited focus on literature written originally in the Romanian language by authors from Romania and/or Moldova.

Before proceeding to an overview of the relevant literary translation awards, it is necessary to offer a short overview of the links between the Romanian-speaking world and the United Kingdom. Though the two countries had had diplomatic links since the late nineteenth century, Romania had developed stronger links with the French-speaking world (Quinney 2007). However, as demonstrated by travelogues of the time, Romanians did travel to Britain and record their reminiscences in literary form (Culea 2015). After World War Two and during the Communist era, the relative isolation – linked with the acute ideological differences of socialist Romania and Soviet Moldova with the Western world – meant that relations with the United Kingdom were more complicated (Sitariu 2006). However, since Romania joined the European Union in 2007, a significant diaspora has emerged (Grierson 2018). In addition, the expansion of Romania’s citizenship laws at the turn of the current century has also ensured that some citizens of Moldova have become eligible for an additional Romanian passport by descent (Pop 2009: 80-82), a development which thus – in the pre-Brexit era – also gave rights for free movement to the United Kingdom.

With regard to the teaching of Romanian, it appears that no official secondary school qualifications in the language are currently available. At the university level, however, a full undergraduate degree programme (BA Romanian and East European Studies) is offered at University College London’s School of Slavonic and East European Studies (SSEES). This includes appropriate training in language, literature, history, and culture, and postgraduate-level modules and evening language classes are also available (UCL 2025). A Romanian lectorate was also established at the University of Oxford in 2012 (Taylor Institution Library 2023), and even though the language is not available as a full single or joint honours degree programme in the Faculty of Modern Languages, there is nonetheless a broad scope of teaching and research activities on offer. In terms of wider cultural diplomacy, the London branch of the Romanian Cultural Institute (*Institutul Cultural Român*, the official organisation charged with promoting Romania abroad) organises a range of regular events and other initiatives to showcase Romanian cultural production (Romanian Cultural Institute 2025).

3. The Four Literary Translation Awards

As Swedish literary scholar Paul Tenngart states at the opening of his recent comprehensive monograph on the Nobel Prize in Literature, “every literary award involves a complex transaction between different kinds of capital” (Tenngart 2024: 6). In this regard, in turning to the annual literary translation prizes which are the focus of

this study, it is notable that all were created within the past quarter-century or so and thus arguably reflect growing interest – cultural, economic, and other – in translated literature among British book-buyers (Hoyte-West 2023a: 237-238).

In order of recency, the awards are the EBRD Literature Prize (2018), the Warwick Prize for Women in Translation (2017), and the International Booker Prize (originally created in 2004, but relaunched in its present format in 2016), with the oldest being the Oxford-Weidenfeld Prize (1999). Of the four, two have strong links with prestigious universities – the Warwick Prize for Women in Translation with the University of Warwick (2025a), and the Oxford-Weidenfeld Prize with three colleges (New, Queen's, and St Anne's) of the University of Oxford (OCCT 2025a). As denoted by its name, the EBRD Literature Prize has its origins in the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, a London-based international organisation (EBRD 2025). The International Booker Prize, itself linked to the highly-prestigious Booker Prize which recognises literature originally written in English, is run by an associated foundation (The Booker Prizes 2025a).

All of the prizes analysed here focus solely on recognising excellence in literary translation, and in this regard may be considered different to the Dublin Literary Award, which chooses its overall winner not only from works translated into English, but also from works originally written in English by authors worldwide. However, some of the awards may differ in their focus – for example, as detailed in the author's comprehensive study of that award (Hoyte-West 2022), the EBRD Literature Prize particularly centres on recognising literary works from the countries that the Bank operates in, including works originally written in less-commonly translated languages. And as its name suggests, the Warwick Prize for Women in Translation places a spotlight on literary works originally written by women authors (Hoyte-West 2023b).

4. Research Findings

In line with the qualitative and desk-based approach outlined in the introduction to this article, the official websites of the four awards were accessed to obtain the requisite information – i.e., the presence of works translated from Romanian from 2017 up to the time of writing (April 2025).

With regard to the longlists and shortlists for the Warwick Prize for Women in Translation, to date only one work originally in Romanian has featured in the listings. This was in 2017, when Ioana Pârvulescu's novel *Life Begins on Friday* [*Viața începe vineri*], translated by Alistair Ian Blyth, featured on the award's maiden longlist (University of Warwick 2025b).

Moving to the International Booker Prize, the longlist for the current year (The Booker Prizes 2025b) featured Mircea Cărtărescu's *Solenoid*, translated by Sean Cotter and – as previously highlighted – the victor of the 2024 Dublin Literary Award. Though Cărtărescu's novel did not advance to the shortlist for the 2025 International Booker Prize, the fact that it was the first novel originally written in Romanian that had ever been longlisted for the Prize was considered noteworthy, as illustrated by a special

interview with the author and translator commemorating this fact on the official Prize website (The Booker Prizes 2025c).

Mindful of its distinct bearing towards recognising excellence in less-translated literatures, it is perhaps unsurprising that recent shortlists and finalists for the EBRD Literature Prize contain four works translated from Romanian. In 2019, the Prize's second year, Varujan Vosganian's *The Book of Whispers* [*Cartea șoaptelor*] translated by Alastair Ian Blyth, was longlisted (Ross 2019). In 2021, Matei Vișniec's *Mr K Released* [*Domnul K. eliberat*], translated by Jozefina Komporalý, also reached the longlist² and was even selected as one of the three finalists (Ross 2021a; 2021b). In 2024, Carla Baricz's translation of Norman Manea's *Exiled Shadow* [*Umbra exilată*] was shortlisted (Powell 2024), and the current year's shortlist (2025) features Moldovan-Romanian author Liliana Corobca's *Too Great a Sky* [*Capătul drumului*], translated by Monica Cure (Powell 2025). At the time of writing this article (April 2025), the three finalists and the ultimate winner of the 2025 EBRD Literature Prize had not yet been announced.

The listings for the oldest of the four literary translation prizes analysed here, the Oxford-Weidenfeld Prize (OCCT 2025b), contained three works originally written in Romanian during the period analysed. In 2017, Philip Ó Ceallaigh's translation of Mihail Sebastian's *For Two Thousand Years* [*De două mii de ani*] reached the shortlist, and the 2024 longlist for the Prize contained Norman Manea's *Exiled Shadow* [*Umbra exilată*] in its translation by Carla Baricz. Most notably for literature translated from Romanian, however, was the 2023 award, which was won by Monica Cure's translation of Liliana Corobca's *The Censor's Notebook* [*Caiet de cenzor*]. From all of the prizes and works examined in this study, this accolade remains thus far the sole occurrence of a translated work of literature originally written in Romanian proving victorious in a major British translation award.

5. Conclusion

In briefly summarising the findings, it has been demonstrated that literary works translated from Romanian are undeniably present in the listings of all four of the major prizes surveyed, albeit to varying degrees. In the cases of the Warwick Prize for Women in Translation and the International Booker Prize, the study has detailed that – at present – just a single work has been longlisted for either award. However, a significantly stronger showing is visible in the listings for the EBRD Literature Prize (four works) and the three works recognised by the Oxford-Weidenfeld Prize, including selection as the overall winner of the 2023 prize. Of the works analysed, the findings are also notable for the presence of multiple entries, either with regard to the same work receiving consideration for different awards (such as Carla Baricz's translation of Norman Manea's *Exiled Shadow*), different works by the same author (for example, two works apiece by Liliana Corobca and Norman Manea), as well as

² Recent editions of the EBRD Literature Prize have renamed this stage as the 'shortlist', from which three finalists (and ultimately an overall winner) are chosen.

different authors translated by the same translator (for example, Alastair Ian Blyth and Monica Cure). It is also noteworthy that the prize listings so far have recognised the translations of works originally written either in the twentieth or twenty-first centuries, almost all by living authors. This means that, to date, no examples of older works from the nineteenth-century literary canon have yet featured in these four main awards. In addition, in thematic terms a number of the works also engage with elements of the totalitarian past of Romania and Moldova, including issues relating to memory and remembrance.

In terms of extending the scope of this research, more detailed analysis on the presence of translated works from Romanian in the British context could involve contacting authors, translators, and publishers. Noting the wide range of factors that govern the global circulation of literary works (Sapiro 2016) as well as within the Romanian context (Culea 2013), this would thereby permit a fuller picture of the procedures underpinning the translation and publishing of a given work to be obtained. In addition, a more holistic and wide-ranging comparative study could involve analysing the translations of works by authors writing in the various minority languages of Romania and Moldova. Literary translations from Romanian into other European languages could also prove an interesting source worthy of further scrutiny.

In common with the author's earlier case studies profiling Bulgarian and Polish literature (Hoyte-West 2024a; 2024b), the future trajectory of translated literature from Romanian in British translation prizes will need to be examined in subsequent editions of the four awards. This will see whether events such as the 2023 Oxford-Weidenfeld Prize for *The Censor's Notebook* or *Solenoid's* longlisting for the 2025 International Booker Prize are indeed indicative of a broader trend. For example, the early signs following *Time Shelter's* victory in the 2023 International Booker Prize tended towards growing interest in literary works translated into English from Bulgarian (Hoyte-West 2024b). And in now demonstrating a relatively strong presence, works translated from Polish have become increasingly widespread in the listings for major British literary translation awards (Hoyte-West 2024a). Therefore, given its strong showing among the longlists, shortlists, and prize-winners of the four awards profiled here, it may be advanced that translations of literary works from Romanian will become more and more prevalent on the shelves of British bookshops over the coming years. As a direct result, it is to be hoped that increasing amounts of literature originally written in Romanian will become available to the book-buying public in the United Kingdom and elsewhere, thus broadening the audience for key literary works from Romania and Moldova.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

Ethical Standards

The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.