

Kitabiyat/Book Review

Narrating the Dragoman's Self in the Veneto-Ottoman Balkans, c. 1550-1650

Stefan Hanß, Routledge, 2023. 352 pp. ISBN: 9780367233693

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Geliş Tarihi/Date of Arrival: 23.11.2023

Kabul Tarihi/Date of Acceptance: 16.12.2023

Tuğyan, Yasemin. *Narrating the Dragoman's Self in the Veneto-Ottoman Balkans, c. 1550-1650*, Stefan Hanß. *Ceride* 1, no. 2 (Aralık/December 2023): sayfa/pp 180-184.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10668965>

The written translation and oral interpretation are practices that hold into the agency of the person involved in such professions, accompanied by their self-reflectivity. The translator or interpreter fabricates words following their notion of the self while perceiving the world through the lens of their past experiences and emotions. In this manner, Stefan Hanß situates a diplomatic translator/interpreter, a dragoman, as the protagonist of the seventeenth-century journey from Galata to the Balkans and the Mediterranean, reflecting on Veneto-Ottoman Balkans throughout his travelogue discussed in the book *Narrating the Dragoman's Self in the Veneto-Ottoman Balkans, c. 1550-1650*. The book was published in the first quarter of 2023 as the third book of Routledge's Life Narratives of the Ottoman Realm: Individual and Empire in the Near East series by Christoph Herzog and Richard Wittmann.

Hanß contextualises his approach in studying early modern self-narratives inspired by Ulbrich and Jancke, focusing on the “autobiographical acts” or the “self” in “wider social contexts” (Hanß 2023, 10). The author also makes use of former studies on dragomans, who are Ottoman subjects, by mentioning Natalie Rothman and referencing *The Dragoman Renaissance*. As Hanß states, this work of microhistory centres on Genesino Salvago, a middle-aged and disabled man who chooses to write a first-person narrative in the form of a travel account. Genesino comes from the family of Salvago dragomans, a continuing lineage and tradition from generation to generation serving as imperial agents for translation and torn between figures of the Venetian Republic and the Ottoman Empire.

The book consists of four main chapters, excluding introductory and conclusory parts, enriched by a second layer of narrative where the readers can hear the author’s voice directly and devoutly, differentiating it slightly from other academic works. Hanß indicates his attempts in multi-layering the book as following the footsteps of Genesino Salvago in a similarly long journey across the Balkans by conducting fieldwork and combining the practice with archival research. For instance, the given map at the beginning of the book is marked with dots indicating places Genesino visited during his journey in Southeastern Europe, starting in 1618. In parallel, Hanß builds the narrative while resembling the journey, which deals with recent occurrences in that geography by presenting photographs from the same areas and mentioning his experiences and hardships as writing the book. Hence, the book has many visual materials like maps, photos, illustrations, and facsimiles, helping the historical imagination flourish.

According to the author, Salvago’s travelogue is regarded as a “self-narrative” embodied by autobiographical features that capture the notion of the self in the context of the multilingual and multicultural disposition of the early modern world (Hanß 2023, 3). Even though Genesino is identified as a *dhimmi*, meaning a non-Muslim subject living within the Ottoman territories under the rule of the Ottoman sultan, his mission is to represent Venice as a road dragoman. Genesino’s interests and motives are highly embedded in Venetian politics, which offers him a chance for trans-imperial mobility and travelling most of his time. Like the performers of oral literature, dragomans take their positions in written translation and verbal interpretation, involving their agencies as active and unique performers, like

storytellers. Therefore, every effort of translating or interpreting implicates autobiographic elements that carry the dragoman's mobile self. In short, a dragoman's experiences determine their insights about translational practices, and later translations they are doing shape their way of telling the story and how they mould self-narratives.

Stefan Hanß prefers to recover a comprehensive history of the early modern Balkans and Mediterranean by placing Salvago dragomans in the centre of the work. Their profession shaped their realities over generations and forged self-narratives around mobilised individuals moving between imperial powers. Mentioning the content of four divided chapters of the book, the first heading, "A Familial Thesaurus: Interpreting Empires," focuses on familial ties and the lexicon that forms the conception of every family member. Genesino's self-writing is undoubtedly affected by the transmissions between former and current dragomans within the Salvago family. Even Genesino's urge to write a travelogue of his Balkan journey depends on his concerns over recognition of his family and its endurance. For example, his father Mateca's assassination entails a fragmentation in Genesino's selfhood and diverts the deep-down courses of the narrative. Salvagos are pictured in a much broader context since their role in diplomatic affairs granted them a place in trans-border and cross-cultural standing by utilising the power of languages. Being part of the vast dragoman network, Salvagos enjoyed the advantages of belonging to a broader "social fabric" that situates and constitutes the interpreter's self exclusively (Hanß 2023, 44). They favoured the hierarchical system that located Salvago dragomans to higher degrees in the diplomatic residence of Venice in Istanbul, providing them with a particular type of protection and wealth while challenging them with potential rivalries.

The book's second chapter highlights spatial mobility's role in translational activities. Hanß argues that Genesino's journey in the Balkans made him mobile while allowing him to recreate and reinvent the "self" in the dominion of his travels. This section details how Genesino Salvago constructed his self-narrative around descriptions of specific environmental contexts. The author articulates Genesino's purpose of travelling as "gathering information" to find an alternative way for Ambassador Francesco Contarini to arrive in Istanbul safely (Hanß 2023, 73). Genesino's choice of inserting that kind of spatial knowledge about the travelling routes into a self-nar-

rative clearly shows Genesino's fondness for telling his own story in the form of penning a travelogue. By authoring a travelogue, Genesino instrumentalises the practice of writing a self-narrative which is masked by a nominal purpose. Moreover, the emphasis on bridges, both by Hanß and Genesino himself, symbolises the mediating and connecting nature of dragomans and bridges alike. Hanß analyses the topography by doing fieldwork, as mentioned earlier. He genuinely adds photos from the artefacts and landscapes to allow the readers to think about past and present events that question contemporary issues of confined borders and disassociated people at once.

The book's third part exposes the notion of the self in the Mediterranean's more expansive context of war, commerce, and espionage. Dragomans are presented as recontextualising and rewording agents who divert the meanings, perspectives and understanding of others or themselves. Hanß entitles the action as "self-translation" (Hanß 2023, 109). In particular, Salvago dragomans ought to be mobile and prominent figures in diplomatic negotiations by taking many roles regarding different political occasions. While doing so, they witnessed wars, participated in commercial dealings, and collected the necessary information as spies to show their loyalty and devotion to high-ranking officials of Venetian diplomacy. Thus, it explains the contextual delicacy of Genesino's self-narrative, dedicated to Contarini, composed to exclude, include, and veil specific information that shaped the political agenda of the Venetian state (Hanß 2023, 135).

The final section of the book dives into the authorship qualification of dragomans. In the rapidly transforming social world of the seventeenth century, dragomans reflect their realities through writing. Self-narratives can provide the author visibility, contrary to the translator's invisible stand in the making of translation or interpretation. Genesino demonstrates his selfhood through the assets of self-narration that render contingency over the existent burden of anonymity of the diplomatic translator. Hanß refers to the translation as a "form of rewriting" to further conceptualise the dragomans' acts of "creative authorship" beyond their acts of translation or interpretation, addressing some of Susan Bassnett's arguments on translational studies (Hanß 2023, 194-210). In the case of Genesino Salvago's travelogue, the self-narrative is a tool for recognition, shedding light on one's service, familial ties, and patronage relations. Genesino presents himself in a self-narra-

tive and guarantees visibility throughout the state's official records, contrary to his invisibility in most cases of translation that fades away over time and place. By inscribing the travelogue for the use of Contarini as the informant of the possible travelling route, Genesino's "self" elaborates on permanence in the Venetian archives. Thus, Genesino constructs a family legacy that endures and functions in travel literature while rendering a self-narrative by using the Balkan journey as his means of recognisability.

In addition, as mentioned earlier, *Narrating the Dragoman's Self in the Veneto-Ottoman Balkans, c. 1550-1650*, is a multi-layered book with a second narrative composed of an intriguing entity that leads various ways of critical reading. In Genesino Salvago's "I Poem," Stefan Hanß tries a radical style of assembling all "I" subjects in original work by generating an alternative form in verses. He argues that a moulded poem like this represents the movement and mobility that a road dragoman entails. Genesino Salvago's fabrication of self-narrative comprises the subject "I," followed by a verb signifying an action as a following pattern as shown in the poem. Thus, Hanß utilises mobility as the essential component in the early modern world of translation with its comprehension of selfhood.

Overall, the book is an excellent read with its interesting layering of narratives symbolising a duality in intertextuality and dragoman's identity. People involved in studying self-narratives, translational and interpretational studies, microhistory, and the history of the early modern Mediterranean and the Balkans can find certain indications for themselves. Also, for a general audience looking for a reading opportunity in cultural history, Genesino Salvago makes a great debut as the leading figure of both personal and familial dragoman narratives. However, one downside of the work can be the seldomness of instances where Genesino could speak for himself throughout the book. Despite the first-edited transliteration of Genesino's travelogue in Italian at the end of the book, the reader cannot mingle with the full-length text translated into English since a part of the holistic reading experience necessitates directing parallel questions for further comprehension regarding the whole narrative. Besides that, Hanß accomplishes a respectable work by unveiling an unknown dragoman narrative hidden in the corpus about selfhood regarding its positioning in Ottoman self-narratives, i.e., Ottoman ego-documents. His way of presenting ideas and findings whilst constructing a multi-layered narrative deserves further appreciation.