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STRATEGIES OF GLOBALISATION IN ROMANIAN LITERARY HISTORIES

Abstract: This paper explores Romanian literary histories in the light of the theoretical acknowledgements of “World Literature”. Its foremost representatives define the international literary space as a competition for universal acknowledgment among nations. The complex dynamic between culture and socio-economic power is responsible for the hierarchical distinction between (semi)peripheral and core literatures. The case of Romanian literature is significant for the East-European struggle to overcome the socio-political delay by manufacturing “great narratives”. The discourse of literary histories, seen, since Herder, as a privileged reflection of the nation’s soul, is contaminated by legitimizing strategies meant to re-locate the (semi)peripheral literatures on the map of world literature. This paper analyzes Nicolae Iorga’s first literary histories at the edge of the twentieth-century, the literary history of Eugen Lovinescu, *Istoria literaturii române contemporane*, *Istoria literaturii române de la începuturi până în prezent* by G. Călinescu, emphasizing the compensation strategies meant to surpass the distance between the symbolic prestige of Romanian literature and core literatures.

Keywords: World Literature, literary histories, East European cultures, identity complex, compensatory mechanisms;

As a reader and a researcher of Romanian literature, I have concluded, during the past few years, that the status of this particular literature – and most

likely the position of Central and East European literatures – within the field of literary studies is far from privileged. The reason is that, with some notable exceptions, comparative literature and transnational historiography ignore a considerable segment of European literatures. The comparative studies undertaken at the beginning of the last century are rather elitist, since their object includes only the great literatures, the so-called canonical ones (such as the French, English, German, followed by the Italian or the Spanish). Moreover, the postcolonial studies emerging in the 1980s also excluded the Central and East European cultures – most of them under Soviet influence, and studied consequently in the field of “Soviet studies”. Since they are neither “canonical”, nor sufficiently “marginal”, these literatures risk remaining outside the object of literary studies.

East European cultures are in the process of development, different both from the developed Occidental democracies and from the underdeveloped former postcolonial countries. Hence, the framework/field of analysis of these literatures is in urgent need of a re-definition. Of course, the two theoretic approaches – the canonical and the counter-canonical – have made attempts to enclose the experience of these literatures either by emphasizing their autonomy (in the former case) or by including them in the sphere of postcolonial studies. In a book that theorizes the projections of Romanian cultural identity, Andrei Terian states that the main argument against postcolonial approach of the East European cultures is that the “colonial” status can be assigned only for the (post)Stalinist era. Before they entered the sphere of influence of the Soviet Union, many of the Eastern European countries had already reached a certain stage of civilization and had experimented various forms of (in)dependence that cannot be kept at colonialism¹.

This is why a more flexible taxonomy must be put to work and – along with it – a new theoretical framework. The free circulation of intellectual goods, as well as the awareness that no system is self-sufficient have resulted in a type of literary research that has deconstructed nationalist assumptions in favor of a transnational perspective. This is why there are contemporary theorists who insist on a revival of the Goethean “Weltliteratur”. However, the “World Literature” approach (as theorized by David Damrosch, Franco Moretti or Pascale Casanova²) discards the

¹ Andrei Terian, *Critica de export*, București: Muzeul Literaturii Române, 2013.

² The main premises of “World Literature” approach can be found in Pascale Casanova, *La République mondiale des lettres*, Paris: Seuil, 1999; David Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?*, Princeton – Oxford: Princeton University, 2013; Franco Moretti, *Distant Reading*, London-New York: Verso, 2013;

premises of illuminist universalism, while looking at literary evolution as if it were a competitive field where the mobility of the cultural products generates its own logic, similar to the economic mechanisms. Within this model of understanding interferences among cultures, literary authority relies, beyond the artistic value of the goods at stake, on a number of factors that condition its position: the “tradition” or “classic nature” of a nation-culture, the number of translations and of universally acknowledged works, the number of texts published in a language, the power of its institutions, the number of libraries and of bookstores, the dynamics of the reading public and so on. By envisaging literary interactions as a ground of uneven forces, “World Literature” approach provides a superior account of the *position* of (young) cultures on the traditional map, escaping the dualism of postcolonial studies that substitute the West with the East in line with the expected logic of the de-centering in favor of the peripheral or of the marginal. This hierarchy (“spiritual economy”³) involves more subtle distinctions between the centers that hold significant cultural heritage (France, England, Germany) and the peripheral or semi-peripheral areas whose social, linguistic and literary resources are less advanced but in continuous mobility. The former are actual agents of internationalization, while the latter category attempts to develop international projects meant to surpass the sociocultural gap. The strategies for gaining literary autonomy are only visible in cultures whose national independence emerged slower. In other words, (semi)peripheral literatures are characterized by the need to construct images of self-affirmation. That’s why their critical discourse is most often interrupted by reflections on national identity.

In *La République Mondiale des Lettres*, an essential book of this theoretic field, the French researcher Pascale Casanova approaches overtly the identity issues of peripheral/semi-peripheral countries related to their (almost geographical) position on the international map of literature. While in the so-called central cultures such problems are absent, in the East European cultures the dilemmas of the sociocultural identity have remained (to some extent until today) on the agenda of public debates. In other words, (semi)peripheral literatures are characterized by the need to construct images of self-affirmation.

The case which interests me in this study is the case of national literary histories. Literary histories have been – and in some cultures, continue to be –

³ Franco Moretti, *Modern Epic: The World-System from Goethe to Garcia Marquez*, London-New York: Verso, 1995;

narratives extremely permeable to the identity-oriented discourse. In cultures such as the Bulgarian, Romanian, Hungarian or Czech, literary history as a genre becomes the privileged propagator of identity values, always going beyond its scientific tasks of gathering and assessing the literary works, in favor of the cultural construction of the so-called ethnic soul. More often than not, literary histories were written in times of political and social crisis, playing, to some extent, the role of compensatory fictions: the first literary history of Hungary, by Ferenc Toldy, appeared just after the failure of the revolutions of 1848; likewise, the histories of the Polish Piotr Chmielowski or Antoni Malecki tried to counterbalance the defeat of the 1863 national independence movements. The mythological or fictional bias of any historical narrative has been emphasized especially by the researchers of East-European literary histories:

“Each literary historian based his writing on three things, his predecessor(s) manuscripts and books discovered since his immediate predecessor, and his own understanding of national mythology. He had thus to enrich national mythology by demonstrating its continuum on the basis of an ever larger number of texts”⁴.

The undertakings of Romanian literary histories are also indebted to the context: Eugen Lovinescu’s literary history was developed in the period immediately after the Romania’s political unification, while G. Călinescu’s was published after an important loss of Romanian territory in 1940. Because of the constant threat to national identity, the 20th century East European literary historiography stayed tributary to the 19th century Herderian postulate of reflection of the national “soul”. Hence, the insistence on features such as the visionary approach, the organicism, the faith in the founding capacity of the narrative and so forth.

The relatively delayed birth of Romanian literature as institution became a national complex visible most of all in the meta-critical discourse. Romanian literary histories did more than arrange, classify and assign values to the literary

⁴ Robert B. Pynsent, “Nineteenth-Century Czech Literary History, National Revival and the Forged Manuscripts”, in *History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe. Junctures and Disjunctures in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, vol. III, edited by Marcel Cornis-Pope and John Neubauer, Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2007;

element; instead, they represented symptoms of a *directional criticism*, for the stated purpose of shifting the minor status of the Romanian culture and aligning it to the occidental central values. To the Romanian writers, the great European literatures constituted a permanent object of anxiety (of influence, I might say). In the 17th-18th centuries, the Romanians would ascribe to the Occidental and Central European space the label “inside”. Therefore, to leave for the Occident did not mean to go abroad, as one says nowadays; instead, it meant to go inside, within an established space of civilization. In his research on the relationship between literacy and national identity, Alex Drace-Francis has observed that in Romanian language, the term “literature” is a neologism, dating from the beginning of the 19th century, when the first literary institutions were created: “The idea of literature made its appearance in Romanian culture in the 1810s and early 1820s, and was not initially distinguished from the idea of learning in general”⁵. Soon, the connection between literature and the concept of nation becomes inextricable, as the idea of literature is seen, by most Romanian scholars, as an “index of national levels of civilization”⁶. Specific not only to Romanian context, but also to other East European countries, is this special relationship between the constitution of nationhood and the belated birth of literature.

On the other hand, the acknowledgement of the fact that by the time the Romanian literature was born as an institution the Italian, German, English or French literatures had already gone through golden ages, generates symptoms of cultural complexes⁷. Influenced by Adler’s psychoanalysis, Mircea Martin, a well known Romanian literary theorist, states that “cultural complexes” of various literatures function similarly to individual complexes. A complex emerges from the comparison to the Other and its discourse symptoms are: overstatements, respectively underestimations of cultural proportions, abusive restrictions or generalizations, compensatory attempts on other levels or pure mystification. The complex can be recognized not only by the distortions it produces, but also by a specific obsessional repeatability.

The discussion is more complicated, obviously, but for now I will list some of the legitimizing strategies in the Romanian literary histories of the last century.

⁵ Alex Drace-Francis, *The Making of Modern Romanian Culture. Literacy and the Development of National Identity*, London-New York: Tauris Academic Studies, 2006, p. 129.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 131.

⁷ Cf. Mircea Martin, *G. Călinescu și complexe literaturii române*, București: Albatros, 1981, p. 34.

Each of these histories attempts, by providential solutions – in other words, by reconverting the inferiority complex in a superiority complex – to relocate the Romanian culture in the international context.

The first and most productive Romanian literary historian – who wrote several literary histories that cover the Romanian culture from its origins to the present times – was Nicolae Iorga. A representative of “Sămănătorism”, a movement that exalted the ethnic criterion, Iorga believed that the specificity of the Romanian literature could be found in the rural imaginary. Therefore, no wonder he annexed to the written Romanian culture its oral, folkloric dimension. In fact, the most obvious process of validation in Nicolae Iorga’s compensatory narrative points to the expansion of the concept of literature to all the spiritual manifestations of the Romanians. In other words, anything touched by a Romanian becomes literature. I quote from the *Synthetic Introduction to the Romanian Literature*, his 1920 work:

“The approach of the term literature is always too narrow. They say: we know what literature is: poetry, short story, novel, plays (...) But the real literature is any clear idea, any delicate or strong feeling expressed in an unusual manner”⁸.

Which means that the literary historian seeks and finds literature in chancellery documents, in private letters, in prefaces to ecclesiastical publications. The main purpose of this illegitimate expansion of the concept of literature is to prove its “nobility” and, thus, its authority, two aspects required by a nation’s accumulation of cultural capital.

Nicolae Iorga’s direct contemporary opponent, the critic Eugen Lovinescu, proposed, on the other hand, a different vision on literature, equally programmatic and directional. In *The History of Contemporary Romanian Literature*⁹, he settles the issue of the delay between the Romanian culture and the European context by elaborating the concepts of “mutation” and of “synchronism”. He states that while during the 19th century the Romanian culture was running slow behind the Occidental one, with the deliberate imitation of the Occidental institutional forms,

⁸ Nicolae Iorga, *Istoria literaturii românești. Introducere sintetică*, prefață, note și bibliografie de Mihai Ungheanu, 1988, Editura Minerva: București, p. 244.

⁹ E. Lovinescu, *Istoria literaturii române contemporane*, București: Editura Minerva, 1981.

in the wake of the 20th century this delay had already diminished. What he calls the modernist movement – i.e. the group of writers he himself had discovered in the “Sburătorul” literary circle – would be the overdue but well-deserved release of the Romanian culture from the status of periphery. Thus, the Romanian culture delay complex is converted positively by the compensatory, obsessive stress on the concept of “modernism”. Significantly, few European cultures have insisted on “modernism” more than a culture always blamed for remaining autochthonist, rural, folkloric.

However, perhaps the most intricate process of identity validation comes from G. Călinescu. In *Istoria literaturii române de la origini până în prezent* (*The History of Romanian Literature from its Origins to the Present Times*), published in the year after the disintegration of the Romanian territory (in 1940 Romania lost Bucovina, Bessarabia and a large part from Transylvania), Călinescu builds a compensatory fiction meant to establish the integrity of Romanian literature. The preface to this *History*, monumental in size and effort, postulates the principle of the Romanian culture’s organicity: “The organic is present in the Romanian culture”¹⁰, wrote the critic on the first page of his *History*, using the biological metaphor usually instrumented in 19th century literary histories: far from suffering from the complexes of discontinuity or the absence of tradition, Romanian literature functions like a living body, whose internal organs grow naturally one from another. Călinescu accounts for the organicism of Romanian literature by using a series of resourceful strategies. The most ingenious one concerns the creation of a web of internal references in order to generate ties among the autochthonous writers’ movements, tendencies, or mere affinities. I quote from Călinescu:

“In most cases, our writers know very little of the national literature and they resist to closed circle comparisons. In an article about Ion Barbu, pointing, as reference, to Conachi, Bolintineanu, Anton Pann seems outrageous and rude. A Romanian poet can be compared only with foreign poets, for example Edgar Poe, Mallarmé, Paul Valéry. Nevertheless, the legitimate method is the former”¹¹.

¹⁰ G. Călinescu, *Istoria literaturii române de la origini până în prezent*, ediția a doua, revăzută și adăugită, ediție și prefață de Al. Piru, București: Minerva, 1982, p. 3.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 4.

The most obvious example of compensatory mystification concerns, however, the attempt to develop (if not quite to invent) a literary tradition as prestigious as possible. The great insistence on the ancient tradition by illegitimately expanding the limits of national literature to the culture of the Romanian ancestors is a significant gesture in his *History*. The will to push the Romanian origins to times immemorial determines Călinescu to postulate the continuity of the Geto-Daci (the Thracian population living on the territory of Romania) spirituality after the Roman occupation. However, since he could not identify any vestige of the so-called ancient Romanian culture, Călinescu invents it by means of the visionary eye of the autochthonous Romantic poets. Asachi, Alecu Russo, Eminescu, Bolintineanu play central parts in the attempt to restore the ancient Dacia by imaginary means. Through a process of more or less deliberate mystification, fictions are held as evidence of the ancient “age” of Romanian spirituality¹².

And if the validating mechanism transforms the deficiency into an advantage, the rural nature itself of the Romanian civilization, still dominant at the beginning of the 20th century, becomes an argument in favor of the “age” and of the “stability of a culture”. In Călinescu’s validating narrative, the a-temporal nature of the myth surpasses the ancient tradition of other civilizations. The great insistence on the ancient tradition (by illegitimately expanding the limits of national literature to the culture of Romania’s ancestors), the metaphors of organic evolution or the constitution of national pantheons in homology to those of core literatures, are just a few symptoms of the self-mythologizing process specific to emergent cultures.

All these complexes reconverted in validating strategies are, in fact, modalities of accumulation of literary capital (in Pascale Casanova’s terms), specific to developing cultures. A complete image of these literatures can be approached only by taking into account the constant relations to what is considered the Center and the attempts of symbolic relocation. The Romanian and the other East European cultures cannot be fully understood if we ignore these “complexes” that accompany their physiognomy like a shadow. On the other hand – and I think this is the subtlety of the World Literature approach as envisaged by Pascale Casanova – it is only the (semi)peripheral cultures that can testify to the relentless struggle

¹² A full account of the process of mystification in Călinescu’s literary history can be found in Mircea Martin, *op. cit.*, and Andrei Terian, *G. Călinescu. A cincea esență*, București, Cartea Românească, 2009.

for symbolic authority. Central literatures, which did not face the need of permanent validation, are somewhat “blind” to this complex mechanism of symbolic establishment. Only the positioning in the eccentricity of literarity (or of that which is considered literary at a point in time) provides a privileged standpoint on the mechanisms of cultural establishment in itself.

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