

Andrei Terian, *Critica de export. Teorii, contexte, ideologii* [*Criticism for Export. Theories, contexts and ideologies*], Muzeul Literaturii Române, București, 346 pages, 2013

Review by Amalia COTOI

Faculty of Letters, Babeș-Bolyai University

Cluj, Romania

amaliacotoi@gmail.com

Criticism for Export. Theories, contexts and ideologies is an academic study that puts together fifteen studies published by Andrei Terian in international academic journals. Despite the eclectic appearance of the volume, given by the plurality of the fields that are brought together in the analyses (such as literary theory, comparative literature, postcolonial studies, transnational historiography, traductology etc.), the author's interests converge to define the status of Romanian literary criticism and the way it could be made globally appealing to literary scholars. A professor at the "Lucian Blaga" University of Sibiu, in Romania, having taught courses on "Romanian contemporary literature", "The evolution of Romanian literary history and criticism", "Synchronicity and differentiation in Romanian literature", "Post-war literary paradigms" and "The rhetoric of the Romanian novel" and with various studies on these topics, in addition to being a pioneer in the reading of Romanian literature through the blend of Romanian criticism and current literary trends in theory, Andrei Terian is a pathfinder, opening new ways of interpretation for future research.

Criticism for Export is based on the premise that the best way of pushing Romanian literature beyond its geographical limits, in order to gain both cultural weight and visibility, is through its critical discourse – "that certain type of critical discourse which retains some relevance beyond the strictly local, regional, national context from which it has arisen"¹. As opposed to the poet, essayist and translator Bogdan Ghiu, who, in his own research on inter-cultural connection, focuses on translation as the new way of cultural communication in *Totul trebuie tradus: noua paradigmă* [*Everything Must Be Translated: the New Paradigm*] (2015), Andrei Terian focuses on the modality of cultural export. Though acknowledging that translation is inherent in the idea of critical export,

¹ "acel tip de discurs critic care își păstrează o anumită relevanță dincolo de contextul strict local, regional sau național în care a luat naștere."

Terian focuses not as much on the channel of transmission (language), but rather on “what” (message) and “how” (code) this transmission is to be achieved.

A good explanation for both the lack of notoriety of Romanian literature abroad and the scarcity of its translations is the fact that it is hard to be translated to a different cultural context, in the absence of an updated literary history written in English or in French. The one and only disciplinary niche which is able to push Romanian literature beyond its original cultural space is comparative literature, but, in the recent two decades,

the studies of Romanian literary history have paid relatively little attention to the comparative perspective. It suffices to recall, for instance, that in the present moment we still do not have a thorough study on Proust’s influence on Camil Petrescu [interwar Romanian prose writer] or on Baudelaire’s influence upon Tudor Arghezi [interwar Romanian poet]².

In contrast to literature, criticism (Romanian criticism, in this case) is much more marketable. “A concept, a method, a theory, an interpretation” are easier to be transported to another cultural context than a piece of prose or poetry. Even so, there are a few dimensions that also make this process a difficult one. A good example in this sense could be the particular founding of traditional Romanian criticism on an aesthetic basis, namely on the idea of “the autonomy of the aesthetics”. Talking about literature in terms of aesthetics, Romanian literary criticism usually puts aside any social, political, religious, etc. (hypothetical) implications in literature. However, these ignored points are exactly the features that could aid and contribute to the export of Romanian criticism: “the role played by Romanian literature and criticism in the building process of the national identity of an East-European culture” or “political and ideological positions of our literary elites” are subjects of interest in the context of exporting criticism, says Terian.

In the subsequent chapters, after putting forth the main conceptual and procedural issues of Romanian literary criticism (in “Argument: Criticism for Export”) and after defining the terms he makes use of (in “A little theory”), the author of *Criticism for Export* defends his introductory premises by giving examples of “how the Romanian criticism

² “studiile de istorie a literaturii române au acordat o atenție destul de redusă perspectivei comparatiste. Ajunge să ne reamintim, de pildă, că nici măcar în clipa de față nu avem un studiu temeinic despre influența lui Proust asupra lui Camil Petrescu sau despre influența lui Baudelaire asupra lui Tudor Arghezi.”

should be exported". The first way of doing so is by analysing the status of Romanian literature as an East-European literature. Quoting David Damrosch, the author of *What is World Literature*, Terian agrees that nowadays the canon of world literature has changed and it is no longer divided into two parts (major works and minor works), but rather into three. There are now "hypercanonical writers", meaning the 'old' canonical ones, who are now better known than before the age of *world literature*. There are, then, the voices of revolutionary writers whose native languages are not widely spoken or taught nowadays and, last but not least, there are the minor writers belonging to major literatures, who are part of the universal canon. Romanian literature is not represented in any of these factions, which is why it is absent from significant books such as the American literary anthologies (*Norton, Bedford or Longman*) and *The Cambridge History of Postcolonial literature*.

Far from lamenting the Romanian literature's unfortunate status, Terian proceeds with a pragmatic rationale and raises practical questions: (1) "To what extent is it legitimate to read the national literatures produced in the last two centuries Central and Eastern Europe as (post)colonial?"³ and (2) "What would we have to gain from applying such a procedure?"⁴. A concept (in this case, *postcolonialism*) is only useful if it is the only one that can name and solve certain issues. When used as a label for all forms of "imperialism/ domination/ dependency", it loses its value. Or, in the case of this particular concept, its explanatory value supports a redefinition of literary periods for literatures from Central and Eastern Europe. This is the reason why Terian comes to the conclusion that literature written in the former Socialist republics follows three stages: (1) a literature of the minorities (during Stalinism), (2) a colonial literature (between 1956 and 1992) and (3) a postcolonial literature (after the dissolution of the Soviet Union). Furthermore, according to the author of *Criticism for Export*,

the term (post)colonialism can be rightfully applied to the Central and East-European literatures in three cases: (1) in the case of the republics formerly belonging to the USSR; (2) in the case of some regions that were more or less autonomous within the Russian Empire, such as Poland, Finland and Transcaucasia; (3) in the case of the minorities within the former Austrian Empire (with the exception of Hungary) .

³(1) "În ce măsură e legitim să citim ca (post)coloniale literaturile naționale produse în ultimele două secole în Europa Centrală și de Est?"

⁴(2) "Ce am avea de câștigat utilizând o asemenea procedură?"

In addition to clarifying the position of Central and Eastern European literatures in the context of postcolonialism, Terian makes a remarkable point in emphasizing why the literatures of Poland and Ukraine are more successful on the global market than Romanian or even Hungarian literatures. The answer, in his opinion, lies in the fact that the former two countries were colonized by the Soviet Union, whereas the latter were not.

Having to do with the Soviet Union, the second chapter is also concerned with the historical context. The author of *Criticism for Export* brings here a few examples of the kind of relationship between criticism and ideology in the Romanian (post)communist culture. The first one is focused on “when” a text uses an Aesopian language. Used by Romanian intellectuals as a form of resistance to communism, Aesopian language is defined as the cache of communist abuses such as “restriction of free speech”, “recourse to violence as a way of «social dialogue»” or “suppression of individual conscience”. Even though there has been a lot of interest shown for this topic, one of the major problems is that there are many studies focused on “the decoding of particular texts rather than on the rhetoric techniques through which the subversive meanings of these texts were produced”⁵. One of these techniques is what Terian defines as the mechanism of “triggering” certain responses. “The triggers” are “discursive sequences” used to bind together a reference from a text with a reference to a political context protected by communist censorship. Nicolae Manolescu, Mircea Iorgulescu and Marin Mincu are three of the Romanian critics who make use of the technique of placing “triggers” in their interpretive texts, which intervene to guide the reader through an Aesopian reading. For instance, Manolescu’s attempt to analyze an avant-garde Romanian writer (Urmuz) in relation with the Romanian socio-economic context by naming one of his short stories an “allegory to consumerist society” is nothing else than an attempt to get hold of the first term of his Aesopian comparison, the consumerist society, in order to oppose it to the second one, the communist society. The second example is proof that the interest shown by critics in the reading of Romanian modern poetry from 1960 to 1980 has, first of all, a political purpose. Nicolae Breban, for instance, is an exponent of a criticism that reads Romanian poetic Modernism in terms of “dark Modernism”, not because the issue of darkness was overlooked by previous criticism, but mostly because by affirming a poetic

⁵“cercetările consacrate limbajului esopic au urmărit mai degrabă decodarea textelor particulare decât tehnicile retorice prin intermediul cărora au fost produse sensurile subversive ale acestor texte.”

of darkness in this manner, the new critical readers were signaled an undermining of the official imaginary of the communist regime.

In the third example, Terian, a critic who simultaneously examines Romanian literature from the inside and from the outside, lists the books of theory translated into Romanian during the communist period. If at the end of 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th, the Francophile orientation of the Romanian intellectual elite is a good explanation for the scarcity of translation of criticism and literary theory, during the first period of communist regime (from 1945 to 1964), any contact with the Western world was broken. The situation changes in the year 1964, when the Romanian Workers' party proclaimed the independence from the USSR. Starting with the end of the '60s, during the next two decades, more than 100 studies of modern criticism were translated into Romanian, published mainly in the *Studies* collection (at the "Univers" publishing house). Authors such as Gérard Genette, Roland Barthes, Hans-Robert Jauss, Umberto Eco, Tzvetan Todorov, Northrop Frye, Jean Starobinski, Georges Poulet were meant to help Romanian intellectuals to approach the Western theory. Though studies of structuralism (such as *Figures*, by Genette) and thematist-phenomenological criticism (such as *The Critical Conscience*, by Georges Poulet) were translated, studies of sociology of literature and psychoanalysis of art were not – Freud was translated in the 80ies, Lacan and Jung only got translated after the collapse of the Soviet Union. One of the main conclusions of this subchapter is that the shortcomings of existing Romanian literary criticism cannot be blamed on translations from well-known literary theorists, but firstly on the impressionistic tradition of Romanian criticism and secondly on the poisonous memory of socialist realism. With regards to the first fallacy, the author points out that even translations from Western theorists were used to support the same tradition of placing aesthetic taste at the top of critical evaluation. For instance, the translation of Umberto Eco acknowledges this impressionistic tradition. On the other hand, in the absence of alternative theories concerning the Modern poetry, the translation of Hugo Friedrich blocked the Romanian understanding of modernism under a negative, decadent category.

The fifth chapter, "Romanian literary history in the age of globalization", brings all the conclusions of the book together in Terian's attempt to suggest a new way of writing Romanian literary history. Before that, the fourth chapter focuses on famous critics such as Toma Pavel, Nicolae Manolescu, Ion Pop and Eugen Simion. Toma Pavel is one of the most well-known expatriate Romanian theorists of literature and fictionality, but that does

not keep him from exalting Classical art at the expense of the Modern one. *Arca lui Noe* [Noah's ark], Manolescu's critical study is relevant to the relation between theory and ideology in the communist age, but this is not a guarantee of its historical accuracy. The critical discourse also contains its Aesopian triggers. Ion Pop's monography on Ilarie Voronca [Romanian avant-garde poet] is one of the best, but it can be read as anachronistic, since its author reads Voronca's poetry in a modernist way. Eugen Simion's idea of "the return of the author" is up-to-date if we take a look at the current Western theories, but that does not make his search for literature as a gap between creation and existence less retrograde.

Terian's discourse has the main advantage of being itself an example of "criticism for export". His perspective stays free of national or subjective biases and is both reader-friendly and highly informative with respect to the present-day situation of Romanian literary criticism and its intercultural prospects. The author does not push comparative readings, he does not bring his own aesthetic preferences to the table under any argumentative disguise and, most importantly, does not romanticize the object of his study. With a very well documented background of updated literary theories and literary histories, Terian makes his volume a suitable ground for proving the functionality of an innovative blend of *close reading* and *distant reading* as a new way of talking about literature.