WORLD-LITERATURE AND THE BESSARABIAN LITERARY SYSTEM. COMBINED AND UNEVEN DEVELOPMENT IN THE SEMIPERIPHERY


Abstract: This essay proposes a theory of interperipheral relations in Eastern Europe, starting from the cases of Romania and the Republic of Moldova. The aim is to affirm a more materialistic interpretation of world-literature studies, starting from the thesis of separation and inequality between the two Romanian-language literary systems. Thus, the essay starts from a critique of several directions of world literature and postcolonialism, returning to the method of world-systems analysis (as conceived by Immanuel Wallerstein and his followers). Another method is that of the Warwick Research Collective, which conceives global literature as defined by the Marxist theory of combined and uneven development. Romania, being in a geopolitical position that is closer to the neoliberal ideologies of “civilizational progress” and “artistic modernity”, represents Moldova’s access point to the transnational market. The cases exemplified in the second part of the essay highlight the way in which a series of Bessarabian authors use and recontextualize some narrative forms specific to post-communist Romanian literature. The authors brought into discussion are the Fracturists Dumitru Crudu and Alexandru Vakulovski, the journalist Vasile Ernu, the anthropologist Dinu Guțu, the Bessarabian novelists Iulian Ciocan and Liliana Corobca, and the émigré writer Tatiana Țibuleac.

Keywords: combined and uneven development, world-system analysis, postcolonialism, Fracturism, ethnographic realism
“Bessarabia is Romania” — this phrase is written on many of the bridges, walls or blocks of flats from both Romanian-speaking spaces; sometimes the message is also translated into Cyrillic letters. As a Romanian, I grew up looking at the progressive multiplication of this slogan, thinking of it as of some kind of axiom, although it is only, at most, an ideological synecdoche. It actually says that, indeed, the Republic of Moldova is part of Romania, but the Russians — more precisely, the members of the former Soviet Union — annexed it a long time ago, committing a regrettable historical injustice that remains unresolved. After 1991, when the USSR collapsed and the federal states became relatively independent nation-states, the Republic of Moldova (and especially the Transnistrian region) became a powder keg due to ethnic and political conflicts between Russians, Ukrainians and Moldovans, “jamming” the process of economic and cultural development of the Republic of Moldova, still under the influence of corrupt and neo-imperialist Russia. On February 24, 2022, with the start of the war in Ukraine, Moldovans received an additional reason to demand union with Romania or, at least, geopolitical synchronization with Western Europe. In this context, it seems problematic to dispute the secular axiom according to which Bessarabia was and still is Romania — wouldn’t it mean to challenge the right of free self-determination of an underdeveloped peripheral country? Not necessarily, because self-determination is a democratic process, and it is ongoing. However, it seems fallacious to operate with such essentialist notions at the level of scientific, historical and, by extension, literary discourse.

Therefore, in what follows, we will discuss the literary system — or, more precisely, the literary systems — of the Romanian spaces from the 2000-2020 interval. In other words, I will analyze the transnational cultural relationship between Romania and the Republic of Moldova after the fall of socialism and the first stage of the neoliberal transition. To achieve this, we will operate with notions of world literature, postcolonialism and world-system analysis. The present study is not aiming to adhere to any of these three theories of wide international circulation, but to criticize some fundamental ideas of these academic trends. The purpose of this analysis is to provide a materialistic rethinking of what world literature (or, more precisely, world-literature) actually means by starting from a local and extremely difficult case: the “Bessarabia is Romania” syndrome. In the first part of the article, it will be argued that we are dealing with two literary systems that are not only
different, but also unequal. This proves that the Marxist theory of “combined and unequal development” applied to world literature studies is applicable not only to the relationship between the center and the other elements of the world-system, but also to the relationship between the (semi)peripheral states themselves, depending on their position in the current capitalist world-system. In other words, this essay adopts Warwick Research Collective’s theory of world-literature with a hyphen: i.e., the literature of the capitalist world-system. In the second part, I will refer to the effects of this power relationship upon literary forms. The object of study will be several contemporary Bessarabian novels that circulated within the Romanian literary system. In chronological order, these works are: Pizdeț by Alexandru Vakulovski (2002), Născut în URSS [Born in the USSR] by Vasile Ernu (2006), Înainte să moară Brejnev [Before Brezhnev Died] by Iulian Ciocan (2007), Un american la Chișinău [An American in Chișinău] by Dumitru Crudu (2013), Kinderland by Liliana Corobca (2015), Grădina de sticlă [The Glass Garden] by Tatiana Țibuleac (2018), Sălbaticii copii dingo [The Wild Dingo Children] by Vasile Ernu (2021) and Perestroika Boys by Dinu Guțu (2021). These writings show that, while Romania is undergoing a process of synchronization with the Western capitalist world, Bessarabian literature is still referring to Romania’s cultural sphere, which mediates Moldova’s access to the transnational literary system. The motif of identity — or the lack of it — plays an important role in these Romanian-Bessarabian literary works.

Towards a Theory of Interperipheral Relations

a) Against World Literature

It is very possible that, in spite of the optimists who consider ‘Bessarabian’ literature an integral part of Romanian literature, literary relations between Romania and Moldova will become in the not too distant future — if they had not already become — similar to those between Germany and Austria, i.e. two countries that speak the same language, but constitute distinct literary systems¹ (Terian 297),

¹ “E foarte posibil ca, în pofida optimiștilor care consideră literatura «basarabeănă» o parte integrantă a literaturii române, raporturile literare dintre România și Moldova să devină în viitorul nu foarte îndepărtat — dacă nu cumva au devenit deja — asemănătoare acelora dintre Germania și Austria, i.e. două țări care vorbesc aceeași limbă, dar constituie sisteme literare-distincte” (My translation).
states, at a certain moment, the Romanian theoretician Andrei Terian. The position of this essay strongly confirms this hypothesis: Romania and Moldova do form two distinct literary systems. This separation is not recent, but has taken place since the end of World War II, after the failure of the incorporation of Moldova into Romania with the help of the Axis’ forces. Indeed, both Romania and Moldova had referred — and continue to refer — to the same literary heritage: for example, the national poet Mihai Eminescu remains a central literary figure common to both systems. However, the decades after 1945 only strengthened the separation between the two literary systems — so much so that it could be said that there are now two distinct national receptions to the same national poet, who is the historical figure of Mihai Eminescu.

There are two counter-arguments that could be inferred at this point. The first of these, and the most common, is the linguistic argument. It states the following: if Moldova and Romania speak the same language, then they form one inseparable literary system. The argument is easy to counter: language is a social process, and not the essence of a nation's identity. Its instrumentation in this regard would be an error. Behind a literary system there is not a code, but a context — in other words, a larger socio-political formation (be it a region, a state, a federation, a continent or a world-system). The second counter-argument is more difficult to ignore: the interpretation of Moldova and Romania as two distinct literary systems implies that the basic unit with which this thesis operates is still the nation-state. Indeed, world literature studies has taught us that, in this age of accelerated globalization, the nation-state must be readily overcome. After the studies of Pascale Casanova, David Damrosch, Mads Rosendahl Thomsen or Franco Moretti, who put into question comparative literature's Eurocentrism and nation-centrism, it is no longer easy to discuss national literatures from a monolithic point of view. Metaphors of interconnectivity are ubiquitous in new literary studies, and the boundaries of literary systems are becoming increasingly difficult to trace and conceive. However, sometimes they are necessary — not for ideological reasons, but rather pragmatic ones. Therefore, the previous idea is rectified as follows: behind a literary system there is a socio-political and material-historical formation. This critique of world literature studies can also be found in the position of Warwick Research Collective:

[A] premature dismissal of the material effectivity of the nation paves the way, in some contemporary criticism, for the adoption of an even less plausible analytical
framework: a militantly idealist transcendentalism that glories in literature for its civilisational (that is to say, community-building) capabilities, across, athwart and, indeed, in defiance of the boundaries (historical as well as geographical) of any actually existing social order. Often encountered in such contemporary slogans as ‘planetarity’ and ‘epochal time’, this new form of transcendentalism avows to release literary and cultural studies from concerns about not simply nation-statism, but capitalist modernity also (WReC 42).

This dematerialization of literary systems has taken many forms. Pascale Casanova stated that, “freed from its former condition of political dependence, literature found itself at last in a position to assert its own autonomy” (Casanova 37) — in other words, that the international literary (meta)system would represent an institutional field independent of the material and geopolitical world-system. In an even more radical way in the sense of dematerialization, David Damrosch insisted on the definition of world literature as “literature in translation” and as “a mode of reading” (Damrosch, 281):

The great conversation of world literature takes place on two very different levels: among authors who know and react to one another’s work, and in the mind of the reader, where works meet and interact in ways that may have little to do with cultural and historical proximity (Damrosch 298).

Such literature-centric perspectives avoid taking into account the central point of any larger critique of world-literature: the concrete inequality between literatures. Franco Moretti observes this problematic relationship by using Immanuel Wallerstein’s theory of the center-semiperiphery-periphery triad: “movement from the periphery to the center is less rare, but still quite unusual, while that from the center to the periphery is by far most frequent” (Moretti 115). What Moretti imports from Wallerstein is the critical dimension that challenges the developmentalist theory: that which divides the world into three distinct worlds, each one on different thresholds of development, by promoting progress and” [putting] forth a very optimistic view of the future of those states that were still poor and struggling” (Wallerstein, World-System, 3). The current world-system does not allow the transgression of structural inequality between the powers of the globe. Literature can
only play inside this limited “chessboard”. For Moretti, “comparative literature is a mirror of how we see the world” (Moretti, 119). And the world is one and unequal.

Therefore, this essay is, in a way, against world literature: not in the sense of the critique offered by Emily Apter in her famous work Against World Literature (focused on the cultural-linguistic level of translation), but against its liberal dimension. This cannot benefit the understanding of literary systems in the periphery, such as those of Romania or the Republic of Moldova. Local projects that seek to restructure Romanian literary studies, such as the collective volume Romanian Literature as World Literature, focus on a “systemic, intersectional approach” (Martin et al. 4), through which Romanian literature(s) appear(s) to be a mosaic of cultural interferences from the most diverse spaces and times. Obviously, the literature(s) in the Romanian language or within the Romanian space are also this. For example, the literature of ethnic minorities within the Romanian state may benefit from such a multifocal reading. However, the analysis of the relations between the Republic of Moldova and Romania must be sensitive to the geopolitical differences that are imposed between the two national states. The point is that they are not part of “the cheerily democratic tableau vivant of a World Parliament where each national literature dreams to be sending its envoys one day” (Martin et al. 36).

b) The Postcolonial Insolvency
For both Romania and the Republic of Moldova, as well as for other post-communist semi-periphery states, postcolonialism — despite its Eurocentric nature, long disputed by contemporary thinkers such as Aníbal Quijano or Walter Mignolo — could be useful for a critical understanding of planetary inequalities. However, the local postcolonial discourse has referred mainly to the legacy of Soviet communism, conceiving it as the main reason for this backwardness. In most cases, the usage of postcolonialism in Eastern Europe involved equating historical socialism with an alternative form of colonialism. In a survey conducted at the 2005 Annual Meeting of the American Association of Teachers of Slavic and Eastern European Languages, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak asked Eastern European researchers from American universities whether they considered themselves postcolonial or not. The argument of the Death of a Discipline’s author starts from the statement that “every postcoloniality is situated, and therefore different” (Spivak et al. 828). But even after relativizing the definition of colonialism, the situation of post-Soviet states is
heterogeneous, in the sense that there are several possible modes of ‘situatedness’ within the very same semiperiphery. Nancy Condee wonders whether, depending on the level of development of the area in question, one can speak of both “occupation” (in the Czech Republic) and “colonization” (in the Uzbek Republic). Harsha Ram states an internal contradiction of the expansionist policies of the Soviet Union, as “[it was] denying the autonomy of its constituent peoples while retaining a federal structure that would nonetheless allow an elaborate discourse of local specificity” (Spivak et al. 832). In his 2011 study Internal Colonization: Russia’s Imperial Experience, Aleksandr Etkind even states that the Soviet Union began a process of colonization within its own borders. In other words, Soviet colonization is supposed to have been relative, paradoxical and gradual. If the imposition of Russian culture and language in any of the ex-Soviet spaces is taken into account, then a new distance would be established between Romania and the Republic of Moldova, which would demonstrate the thesis of the separation of the above literary systems: that of the degree of “colonization” by the Soviet Union, in which Bessarabia would certainly be “more” postcolonial than Romania.

However, such discussions are problematic. In a 2014 article, Vitaly Chernetsky finds it unfortunate that cultural studies in the former Soviet Union have not been influenced or affected by postcolonial discourse. Moreover, Chernetsky criticizes Edward Said for forgetting to add Russian / Soviet imperialism to his critical works: “While it is understandable that these studies could not possibly have been all-encompassing, the addition of the Russian empire and eastern and southeastern Europe to Said’s overall scheme challenges the otherwise dangerously looming binarization in a profound way” (Chernetsky 32). However, putting Russian imperialism on the same political level as Western imperialism only continues, in an uncritical and reductionist way, the anti-communist ideology that has dominated the Eastern European space (including Romania and the Republic of Moldova) since the 1990s. Bogdan Ştefănescu’s studies are symptomatic. As the Romanian theoretician states, “[t]he postcommunist subject does not fit the conventional postcolonialist descriptions of the victims of capitalist colonization and imperialism” (Ştefănescu 22). Therefore, he insists that “postcolonial cultural criticism should value each strategy of postimperialist emancipation according to the
context of its occurrence” (Ștefănescu 35). Moreover, post-Soviet liberalism becomes as important for the emancipation of the colonies as post-colonial Marxism\(^2\).

There are two issues with this perspective. First, if each geopolitical empire (whether Soviet or Western) is located on the same level in terms of its colonial nature, this would mean that the Cold War’s universe had been divided into two different world-systems, and the moment of 1991 would be the democratic “reunification” of the two global systems. For Wallerstein, who insists on the singularity of the capitalist world-system, this would be impossible to conceive. We will return to this later. Secondly, if the postcolonial discourse applies to both cases, it means that we can speak of a process of decolonization in the case of Eastern European states. Thus, Romania and the Republic of Moldova would be at the crossroads of a major cultural emancipation: the gradual return to the “natural” state, prior to the time of 1948. But decolonization is, in fact, a recapitalization. John D. Haskell and Boris N. Mamlyuk perceive the ideology of transition in the countries around the former Soviet Union as a form of “informal colonialism”, which aims to “bring the rest of the world under the reach of Western capitalism” (Haskell & Mamlyuk 8). Therefore, neither the former colonies nor the post-Soviet states escaped this “Faustian bargain, where modernization was the only means to rescue oneself from exploitation, but that modernization required only another version of exploitation” (Haskell & Mamlyuk 10). Was what happened to the post-Soviet states after 1991 an overcoming of the Soviet colonialism? Were they recolonized by the West? Or was it a form of self-colonization, according to Kiossef’s terminology? Does this mean that, in this part of the world, decolonization coincides, paradoxically, with recolonization? Or that there are two (or even three) successive layers of colonization in this area? Is there a pre-capitalist identity where Russia and Eastern Europe can return by decolonializing themselves? The answer is still confusing and cannot be otherwise. What is important to note is that the situation of the post-Soviet states can hardly be explained by the postcolonialist grid, whether we use it against

\(^2\) “The worth and function of the different ideological discourses is not inherent and absolute, nor does is it depend on synchronization with a supposedly universal calendar of progress—rather they are the outcome of being situated in the particular historical and cultural context of their own evolution. This is why Marxism and liberalism may acquire similar emancipatory values in the circumstances provided by postcolonialism and postcommunism, respectively. One may, therefore, recognize a similar structure and situational value in the relationship between the two ideological discourses and the contexts of their occurrence” (Ștefănescu 40).
communism or against capitalism. (At best, it would be more functional for the situation of the indigenous peoples of Eastern Russia.)

c) Back to Wallerstein

The reason for the failure of the postcolonial grid is also given by WReC: from Edward Said’s *Culture and Imperialism*, “the tendency to essentialize «the west» has become a staple ingredient, across the range of literary scholarship, of much of the work that (...) has been directed to «unthinking Eurocentrism»” (WReC 31-32). This “substitute[s] the civilisational category of 'the west' for the category of capitalist modernity as the object of their analysis — a substitution that has the inevitable effect of dematerialisation” (WReC, 29). Soviet imperialism is seen as the source of this economic, cultural, and literary backwardness, when, in fact, “the USSR had proposed an alternative model to capitalism, not to imperialism — and it had lost the ideological battle for structuring society” (Haskell & Mamlyuk 13). Indeed, inequality has always been at the heart of the capitalist world-system, whose geographical position is, for the time being, the West (or the Global North, according to other thinkers). World-literature works according to this economic adjustment. The literary systems in Romania and/or the Republic of Moldova do not belong to some proper former colonies, one in a more backward position than the other, but to two states that aspire to the same center. The only difference is that the access of the Bessarabian literary system to this center is made through the Romanian one.

For the Eastern postcolonial discourse (or, at least, for Bogdan Ștefănescu), the fragmentation of the USSR in the early 1990s represented the fall of an empire; thus, the transition — which is “not actually a temporal construct, but an ideological one” (Poenaru 11)³ — consisted in the gradual return to “normality”, i.e., capitalism. The inherent effect of such a transition is the economic, cultural and, in particular, literary drawback of Eastern countries. The location of the Republic of Moldova closer to the irradiation center of Russian imperialism was thought to be the reason for it being one step behind Romania in cultural international competition. This essay seeks to change the perspective by returning to Wallerstein’s original theory of the capitalist world-system. The most important nuance of the argument is that “progress” (in economics and literature) is also an ideological construct to which we

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³ „(...) nu este de fapt o construcție temporală, ci una ideologică” (My translation).
should not attribute positive or negative values. The reason why the literary system of the Republic of Moldova is seen as “delayed” compared to that of Romania is given by the structure of global capitalism during the years 1990-2020. The same structure that enables the hierarchy between the center and the peripheries also grades the level of “development” of the semi-peripheries. Within the Eastern European semi-periphery, the chance of the literary system from the Republic of Moldova to impose itself on the planetary level consisted in its relative attachment to the Romanian system. We will return to the literary effects in the second part of this essay. As for the postcommunist situation, Wallerstein’s 1993 opinion was as follows:

The collapse of the Communist bloc is thus a double setback for the world-system. For the USA, it is a geopolitical catastrophe, as it eliminates the only ideological weapon USA had to restrain the EC and Japan from pursuing their self-defined objectives. For the capitalist world-economy as an historical system, it marks the onset of an acute crisis, since it lifts the Leninist justification of the status quo without replacing it with any viable substitute (Wallerstein, Cold War 4).

History has proved that this impression was false: capitalism has passed the test. The 1990s marked the culmination of a policy of expanding neoliberalism in the former Soviet semi-periphery. The case of the Romanian economy was mapped, among others, by Cornel Ban in Dependență și dezvoltare: economia politică a capitalismului românesc [Dependence and Development: The Political Economy of Romanian Capitalism] (2014). However, the Bessarabian case did not receive the same attention from researchers. In the absence of clearer data on the materialist relationship between the two states, the theory of inequality and cultural dependence between the literary systems in Romania and the Republic of Moldova is still speculative. However, the protests in the Republic of Moldova (2009, 2016 and 2019) prove that we are dealing with a country divided in two: on the one hand, the conservative and Russophile electorate of the Communist Party, and, on the other, the pro-European and unionist public sphere. Although the elections were won by the former (at least until Maia Sandu’s presidency in 2020), the other part of the population undertook numerous strategies of internal and external self-legitimation. One of these strategies was the promotion of Bessarabian literature within the Romanian literary system: either by distributing books beyond the Prut river (in the case of few Bessarabian publishing houses — for example, Cartier), or by authors
being directly published at local publishing houses. This fact does not imply a fluid, democratic or even Damroschian interference of the two literary systems, but rather a symptom of the soft power exercised by the literary system of the Romanian state upon its neighbor. Romania’s entry into NATO and the EU only accentuated this state of affairs. The literary examples discussed below tend to confirm the hypothesis.

**The Theme of Identity in Bessarabian Prose**

This part of the essay refers to the prose of the Bessarabian authors written at the beginning of the millennium which has also circulated inside the Romanian literary system. An analysis of the editorial relationships between the two literary systems is still to be made; but, until a more in-depth study on this issue is realized, some general ideas can be stated, starting from the thesis of the structural distinction between the two Romanian-language literary systems. First of all, there are few Bessarabian publishing houses that have managed to “send” their writers beyond the Prut; the case of Cartier is the only one discussed below. Instead, Romanian publishing houses such as Polirom, Aula or Casa de Pariuri Literare (to mention only those that appear in this article, to which we can add Humanitas, Rao, Nemira, Trei and so on) have distributed books in both national systems. Secondly, the relationship of distinction and inequality between the two literary systems proposes a rethinking of the status of the authors who left the Republic of Moldova to move to Romania — therefore, they acquire the ambiguous status of emigrant writers, and their analysis as such is necessary and fruitful for future studies. It can be seen that the “transplant” often takes place from the Moldovan to the Romanian semi-periphery. Reverse cases are extremely rare (an example could be the poet Moni Stănilea from Timișoara). Thirdly, the central institutions of the two literary systems, which have existed since the communist period, are separate — i.e., the Writers’ Union of Romania and the Writers’ Union of Moldova.

The analysis of the writings themselves starts from the central idea of WReC’s fabulous study: the group of researchers claims that modernity (as a global trend towards artistic ‘progress’) is both singular and simultaneous. In the same way that world-capitalism sets an economic trend, world-literature points to an aesthetic direction: modernity — throughout history, we can identify a number of such global directions, such as realism, modernism, postmodernism and so on. By applying the
Marxist theory of uneven and combined development, it can be observed that, especially in the peripheries of the world-system, modern literary genres coexist with archaic local forms. Thus, Moretti’s theory of “foreign form, local material—and local form” (Moretti 57) is recontextualized as such:

if we put various (semi-)peripheral European works (...) into conversation with one another and read them together without ignoring what we might call their non-simultaneous simultaneity, we begin to discern the ways in which they typically register the ‘local’ and ‘global’ aspects of modernity as at one and the same time traumatic, destructive, stimulating and profoundly transformative (WReC 127).

The thesis of the present paper presupposes a less spectacular case: that of the relations between a couple of semi-peripheries that are in different stages of ‘development’. The contrasts are less obvious: they are not to be conceived between exuberantly modern and exotically archaic forms. In any case, the subchapter on postcolonialism suggests that there is no stable identity or cultural background originating in Eastern Europe: the East has always been on the fringes of global capitalism, and their search for folkloric forms is a modern acquisition. However, Bessarabian literature is a case of “combined and uneven development” in which heterogeneity is less noticeable, since the stages of development are structurally closer. After the 2000s, Bessarabian authors have referred to Romania as the local center of modernity. All the authors used the narrative forms of the Romanian literary system to promote themselves beyond the Moldovan market. A peculiar case is that of Tatiana Țibuleac, which we shall discuss in the last part of the article.

a) Emigrant Bessarabians
Among the Bessarabian prose writers who emigrated to Romania, two particular literary phenomena can be brought into discussion: Fracturism and non- (or semi-) fiction. The fact that both are aiming to transcend literary imagination is relevant.

a.1. Fracturism
Fracturism is a local literary movement from early 2000s’ Romania. It was initiated by Marius Ianuş and Dumitru Crudu in 1998. Their fundamental text is Manifestul fracturist [The Fracturist Manifesto], which was originally published in the Transylvanian magazine Monitorul de Brașov. Fracturism was an avant-garde
movement in the Romanian literary field, as it challenged both the central literary institutions and movements of that period (the Writers' Union, postmodernism etc.) and the ideology of the capitalist transition. In their work, anti-communism (as the denigration of historical socialism) coexists with anti-capitalism (the criticism of the transition). The ready-made aesthetics of the Fracturists was also highlighted by an autobiographical and performative program, in which the authors — portrayed as the economic ‘losers’ of the transition — proposed a transitive, direct and politically charged writing\(^4\). Fracturism is relevant to our thesis as it is also a phenomenon of collaboration between Romanian young writers and authors of Bessarabian origin. Dumitru Crudu himself, Marius Ianuș's friend and colleague, was born in the Republic of Moldova, studied in Brașov and later returned to Bessarabia.

Initially published as a poet since 1994, Crudu began writing prose in 2008, by publishing the novel \textit{Oameni din Chișinău} [People of Chișinău]. However, his second novel, \textit{Un american la Chișinău} [An American in Chișinău], is more important for our thesis since it proposes an example of “cultural triangulation”\(^5\) in its view on Bessarabian identity: the relationship between Moldovans, Romanians and Westerners (or the “Americans”). The prose is simple and naive: it presents the trip of a rich American man to Romania and the Republic of Moldova. It is narrated by Dumitru Crudu's alter-ego, who is also a student of Letters in Brașov. Certain misogynistic aspects cannot be overlooked: for example, the fact that the female character Lora is sexually objectified both in the eyes of the Moldovan narrator and of the American character. However, the libidinal plot highlights a frustration inherent in Bessarabian subjectivity. The analogies are quite primitive: Lora represents the “object of desire” for the Bessarabian protagonist, his access road to Romania; the appearance of the American man interferes with this ascent, as the foreigner “steals” Lora, and the rest of the novel consists of self-degrading lamentations coming from the main character. Crudu's alter-ego constantly rejects his origins: “No, I'm not from the Republic of Moldova, he denied, I'm from Romania, and he noticed that everyone around him breathed a sigh of relief” (Cruďu 76)\(^6\). It comes in response both to the critical attitudes of Romanians towards

\(^4\) See Bălici, “Fracturismul”.
\(^5\) See Terian, “Cultural Triangulation”.
\(^6\) “Nu, nu sunt din Republica Moldova, a infirmat el, sunt din România, și observă că toată lumea din jurul său răsuflă ușurată” (My translation).
Moldovans and to the superiority complex of the American ‘Don Juan’. An interesting moment of communication between the two men highlights the elliptical cultural dialogue between nations: “[C]onversation wasn’t working out, in spite of what happens in that beer television ad. There, the Romanian listed names of English writers, and the Englishman, of Romanian footballers, and that discussion worked out smoothly. But not their discussion. There was a deep silence between them, as in the high seas” (Crudu 190). The passage shows that the dialogue of the semi-peripheries with the center becomes impossible even when the peripheries adopt the language of the center.

Alexandru Vakulovski is another Bessarabian writer from the Fracturist generation. His first novel, Pizdet, is “the autofiction of a generation crushed by hatred, disgust and revolt, for whom Romania is only a broken promise” (Pîrjol 240). Thus, Yo (the nickname of the protagonist), a youngster of Bessarabian origin and a student of Letters in Cluj-Napoca, explores the chaotic world of student dormitories and the compensatory distractions of the post-revolutionary generation. Given the Bessarabian descent of the writer, his national identity presupposes a double relation. Regarding the relationship between the Republic of Moldova and Romania, the character’s attitude will be idealistic at first — “Sun, sand, Coca-Cola, sweet boredom, this was my image of Romania when finally, my dream came true: Romania! I was being transferred to study in Romania!” (Vakulovski, 41) —, and then critical — “This is the beginning of the shattering of the dream about Romania, a decrepit grandmother who wants to flirt with Europe and NATO” (Vakulovski, 44). The narrator notices the fact that the legacy of communism is the element that inextricably links and brings closer both the idyllic Romanian culture and the Bessarabian one: ‘Hunger, pain, humiliation, crime define us all. Only crime can

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7 “[C]onversația nu prea se legă, spre deosebire de ceea ce se întâmpla în spotul ăla la bere de la televiziune. Acolo românul făcea o paradă de nume de scriitori englezi, iar englezul, de fotbaliști români și discuția mergea strună. Nu însă și conversația lor. Între ei stăruia o tăcere grea, ca în largul mării” (My translation).

8 „(...) autofițiunea unei generații măcinate de ură, sicit și revoltă, pentru care România nu e decât o promisiune înșelată” (My translation).

9 „Soare, nisip, coca-cola, plictisală dulceagă, asta era imaginea mea despre România când în sfârșit visul meu se împlinea: România! Pream prin transfer la facultate în România!” (My translation).

10 „Asta este începutul spulberării visului cu România, o babă ramolită care cicc vrea să se dea la Europa și la NATO” (My translation).
wipe out the remaining waste inherited from the USSR” (Vakulovski 11). From the position of the double provincial (both towards Romania and towards Europe), Vakulovski is attacking every form of dominance and imperialism.

a.2. Memoirs. Ethnographic Realism
In the Romanian prose written after the 1990s, there was a revival of memoirs:

In terms of nonfiction competition, the book market is dominated in the first postcommunist decade by a testimonial literature documenting a wide range of experiences, especially experiences of non-adherence and trauma in relation to communism (Iovânel 348).

In general, these are “prison memoirs” (Iovânel 349), which paint the pre-revolutionary era in an antagonistic way. In a system dominated by such a quasi-fictional genre in the first decade of the transition, the volume Născut în URSS by Vasile Ernu is quite strange, as it resumes the memoirs’ formula about communism and rewrites it with a nostalgic twist. The volume recreates Ernu’s childhood in Odessa. The USSR does not appear as a fragmented formation, but as a social, political and ontological universe in itself, in which “geography and history make an inseparable tandem” (Ernu 139). The Bessarabian author’s premise is that, “with the disappearance of the Soviet Union and communism, something was lost” (Ernu, 9): whether this is about living together in a Soviet commune or it refers to the fetishist quality that certain products gained (from jeans to music) in a state economy, the writer revisits the post-Stalinist era before perestroïka with a very specific candor.

The inclusion of Vasile Ernu in the Romanian literary system had the effect of transplanting content from another semi-periphery (the exotic perspective of the Moldovan-Ukrainian Ostalgie) through the prism of a Romanian literary form (90s’ anticomunist memoirs). The same assertion strategy in the field is to be found in the 2021 volume Sâlbaticii copii dingo. This time, the plot revolves around the actual period of perestroïka in the city of Chișinău. It outlines a plausible sociography of the Moldovan capital during Gorbachev’s regime, with gopniks, rockers and proletarians

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11. „Foamea, durerea, umilinţa, crima ne defineşte pe toţi. Numai crima poate șterge deșeurile rămas moștenire de la URSS” (My translation).
12. „În ce privește concurența nonfictionii, piața de carte este acaparată în primul deceniu postcomunist de o literatură testimonială care documentează un spectru larg de experiențe, în special experiențe de inadecviune și traumă în raport cu comunismul” (My translation).
from ucilișce (Soviet neighborhoods). In this world, three main elements stand out: communism (which leaves a strong ideological imprint), the USSR (which centralizes all ethnic pluralism in the Russian area), and the middle class (which eventually takes over the narrator). However, in 2021, the Romanian literary system has dramatically changed, and the formula has become quite obsolete.

Another relevant literary trend in the Romanian space is that of ethnographic realism. This ‘subgenre’ involves combining anthropological documentation with fictional inquiry. The authors are interested in representing marginal social milieus. We can find a thematic correspondent for this genre in the “local-color fiction” of the United States at the end of the nineteenth century, due to their shared interest in marginality and poverty — “local-color settings [...] has usually depicted as someplace outside the mainstream, at a distance from national centers of financial, political, or cultural power” (Barrish 74). The first historical example of this literary formula is the novel Soldații [The Soldiers], by the queer Romanian author Adrian Schiop, which portrays the love affair between a Romanian and a Romani man in the Bucharest ghetto of Ferentari; the book was also made into a film by Ivana Mladenovic in 2018. The success of Schiop's book was eloquent, as it managed to create a legacy. Thus, Dinu Guțu, an author with Bessarabian origins, made his debut in 2017 with the novel Intervenția [The Intervention], which documents the life of the Dinamo ultras from Bucharest. It was not until 2021 that Dinu Guțu decided to combine the local Romanian form with the Moldovan anthropological content: finally, the novel Perestroika Boys was a representation of the life of the teenagers in the early 1990s’ Chișinău. “Street life” reveals ethnic tensions (between Romanian Moldovans and Russian Moldovans) and ideological confusions (like that of equating anti-Russianism with anti-communism). But the most impressive case is that of the character Dimon, the narrator’s high school mate. Being born a Moldovan, growing up in Transnistria and having moved to Chișinău, Dimon cannot find his place either among the gopniks or among the Ukrainians from Tiraspol, or among the Romanian classmates. It is this identity fissure, caused by systemic tensions, that leads to a climax in the last pages of the volume: the key moment in which ethnic violence is born.

13 See Bâlici, “Realismul etnografic”.
b) The Prose of Collective Memory

Within the Moldovan literary system, it can be seen that the tendency to fictionalize is still intact. Moreover, the authors often repeat the formula of the so-called novel of “collective memory”, which was an important narrative form in post-communist Romania, due to representative writers such as Dan Lungu, Radu Pavel Gheo, Petru Cimpoeșu, Florina Ilis, Filip Florian and many more. They tried to translate the confusing experience of communism and the transition to capitalism into standardized and recognizable human typologies (the former Securitate member, the nostalgic Ceaușescu fan, the capitalist entrepreneur etc.). The same strategy can be observed in the novels of authors such as Iulian Ciocan or Liliana Corobca.

The former’s Înainte să moară Brejnev (2007) is a novel about the last decades of communism in the Republic of Moldova: it portrays Brezhnev’s time, in a Chișinău at the beginning of liberalization, before glasnost. A central theme of the work is, in fact, the conflict between the socialist generations. Veteran Polikarp Feofanovici finds himself in the middle of a changed, re-ideologized world: “Something serious is happening to the young generation. They’re impertinent, lazy, they lack ideals. Don’t you know that all teenagers listen to western music? Which one of them still reads Marx or Lenin in his spare time?” (Ciocan 124)14. Another major conflict is between the dominant discourse of the time (which promulgates a false and idealized image of the socio-political situation) and the material reality. The latter is reflected by two characters. The first is the worker Vladimir Vladimirovich, who lives in a komunalka portrayed in completely different colors than the nostalgic ones of Vasile Ernu: “The common washbasin, with the painted glass window sill covered in cigarette buts and burnt matches, and the common kitchen, where day and night soups and teapots were boiling for the simple reason that the greasy stove had only two burners” (Ciocan 44)15. The second is Grişa Furdui, a poor peasant for whom the komunalka is actually an unattainable ideal. The conflict between discourse and reality highlights the discrepancies between living standards within the very same Republic, where only Feofanovici has a good position; however, this

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15 „Lavaboul comun, cu pervazul geamului vopsit acoperit de chiștoace și chibrituri arse, și bucătăria comună, în care zi și noapte dădeau în foc ciorbe și fierbeau ceainice din simplul motiv că aragazul slinos avea numai două arzătoare” (My translation).
position will be shaken by post-Stalinist liberalization. Created inside the Bessarabian space and transplanted into the Romanian literary system, Ciocan’s novel seeks to consolidate the anti-communist imaginary, but also to present the fluctuating identity of the Soviet man.

An interesting case is that of the novel Kinderland (2015), by Liliana Corobca. This time, the diegesis is that of the post-communist rural world, which is affected by two phenomena: once, the precariousness in which the Moldovan space ended up after 1991, and, secondly, migration. It is impressive how this closed universe is described: the narratological perspective is that of a young girl who stays home to raise her brothers by herself, while her parents are working abroad. For this reason, it seems that the whole map to which the novel has access is extremely limited. Romania does not even appear as a geographical reference point. Instead, there are the two major areas of emigration for the parents: on the one hand, the West (where the mother works), and on the other, the Yakutia region of Siberia (where the father emigrated). The two destinations (Italy and Russia) are in balance: between West and East lies Moldova, a country dominated by uncertainty and poverty. The narrator’s projections of other social realities are alienating: “Is it true that there, in very rich and developed countries, children are no good? (...) With fathers, mothers, nannies, teachers, and they are rude and stupid, they let themselves be washed, fed, dressed, put to sleep, educated” (Corobca 61)16. Thus, there is an imagology of the abandoned child, whose identity is unimportant, as he lives in a closed universe, devoid of horizons, dominated by injustice.

c) The case of Tatiana Țibuleac
What is surprising in Tatiana Țibuleac’s biographical journey is that she is a Moldovan author who emigrated to the West: the author was born in the Republic of Moldova, has lived in Paris since 2008 and published her two novels — Vara în care mama a avut ochii verzi [The Summer when My Mother’s Eyes Were Green] (2017) and Grădina de sticlă (2019) — at the publishing house of Cartier, which has already been stated to be a “binational” publishing house, with consistent distribution in

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16 „E adevărat că acolo, în țările foarte bogate și dezvoltate, copiii nu sunt buni de nimic? (...) Cu tați, cu mame, bone, institutoare, iar ei rotofei și prostălani, se lasă spălați, hrăniți, îmbrăcați, culcați, educați” (My transaltion).
both Romanian-language literary systems. She is also the most prestigious author, being translated into languages such as Serbian, Polish, German, Bulgarian, Albanian or Macedonian, and also the winner of the European Union Prize for Literature in 2019. This complex back-and-forth movement — from the Moldovan semi-periphery to the center, from the center to the Romanian semi-periphery, and vice versa — is of real interest for this article. Considering the theory of distinction and inequality between the two literary systems, we notice that the tendency of the Bessarabian authors is to approximate the formulas that circulate inside the West-Romanian space. But in the case of Țîbuleac, the formula is exotic for both literary systems: due to her affinity for lyricism and the refinement of the ellipse, the author is closer to the communist and postcommunist Russian literary system. This fact is also reflected in the content of the plot itself: the main character is a Moldovan orphan girl, adopted by a wealthy woman of Russian origin; the attempt of the adoptive mother to “teach” the girl to forget about her Romanian identity and original language is the main thread of the novel. If the first part of the book is situated in an unhistorical communist age in a multicultural Chișinău, the second part portrays the fall of socialism in the Eastern bloc and the ‘loss’ of the Russophile landmarks on which the protagonist’s life was previously built. Her subsequently moving to Bucharest only deepens the drama regarding one’s identity and language. Tatiana Țîbuleac's case raises many issues: of course, we are dealing with a foreign form (Russian) and a local content (Moldovan); at the same time, both are alienated by the sounding board in which they were exported (Romania and Western Europe). Tatiana Țîbuleac's literary success can be seen as an effect of some kind of exoticism: she creates a Slavic and Soviet artistic language by means of a literature that has access to the center of world-literature.

Conclusion

The present essay proposes a theory of (semi)peripheral interferences starting from the cases of Romania and the Republic of Moldova. The aim was to propose a materialistic picture of the economic, cultural and literary relations between the two countries. For this reason, viewing the literatures of the two countries as being different literary systems is useful, as it highlights the inequality between the semi-peripheries of Eastern Europe. This theory of distinction and inequality does not abandon the international grid of recent literary studies (such as world literature and
postcolonialism), but simply nuances it by returning to Immanuel Wallerstein’s original theory of world-system analysis. Romania, representing a position closer to the desideratum of “civilizational progress” and of “artistic modernity”, represents the access point of Moldova to international self-promotion. The cases exemplified in the second part of the essay highlight the way in which the Bessarabian authors (having emigrated to other spaces or not) imported the forms of the Romanian post-revolutionary literature, applying them to the local social reality. A special case is that of Tatiana Țibuleac, but she — given her identity as an emigrant to France — manages to strengthen the rule of dependence on the World Republic of Letters’ center.

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