

Dragoş BUCUR
Babeş-Bolyai University
Cluj-Napoca, România
dragos.bucur@ubbcluj.ro

JEWISH LITERATURE & WORLD LITERATURE. UNLEARNING (TRANS)NATIONALISM

Recommended citation: Bucur, Dragoş. “Jewish Literature & World Literature. Unlearning (Trans)Nationalism”. *Metacritic Journal for Comparative Studies and Theory* 9.1 (2023). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24193/mjcst.2023.15.11>.

Abstract: The present paper proposes an investigation of the concept of Jewish literature in its relation to world literature studies within an analysis of the first generation of Jewish writers who became part of the Romanian literary life following the 1923 emancipation. Born approximatively between 1890 and 1910, those authors do not form a homogenous group, representing different political orientations and relationships with their Jewish identity. One of the premises of the study is that, even if Jewish literature appears as a suitable corpus of text for world literature studies, considering its intrinsically transnational nature, it did not receive significant attention that would reflect this supposition, as researchers from both fields pointed out. Thus, studying the relationship between the two fields can inform one another and expose certain shared conflicts with the (trans)nationalist paradigm.

Keywords: avant-garde, literature of the ghetto, antisemitism, transnationalism, Jewish-Romanian literature

When faced with the challenge of analyzing the relation between two concepts which are complex in their structure and history, one is traced back inevitably to general questions that expect theories, rather than answers. Ironically enough, in the case of Jewish literature and world literature, those questions are also the titles of representative studies in their respective fields. I am of course thinking of David Damrosch’s 2003 book *What is World Literature?* and *What is Jewish Literature?*, the 1994 collective volume edited by Hana Wirth-Nesher. It goes without saying that both concepts were subjected to noticeable alterations of their meaning, even if

considering only the decades that passed since the publication of the two volumes and not their entire etymology. Therefore, aiming to re-answer those questions or analyze exhaustively their diachronic evolution would be an enormous task. Hence, what I propose is simply a short investigation of the ways in which the concept of Jewish literature relates to that of world literature, how the two can inform each other, what can be said in terms of interconnection, influence and relationship. My hypothesis is that the common ground between the two fields can be reduced to the repeated word in the collocations: *literature*. In the sense that both field of studies represent prolonged efforts of departing from the nationalistic paradigm of literary studies, ultimately traceable to the indissociable link between the concept of literature and that of the nation-state. Consequently, a certain peripheral condition enacts an identifiable relationship between *worldliness*, *Jewishness* and literature (as an ideological apparatus of nationalism).

As Marko Juvan points out in *Worlding a Peripheral Literature*, “the nineteenth century, national ideology has significantly impregnated the originally cosmopolitan discourse of world literature” by rediscovering the Goethean concept of “*Weltliteratur*, conceived as a composition of national literatures” which “was instrumental in establishing the international profile and self-esteem of individual European national literatures, primarily those that started their worlding from a peripheral or semi-peripheral position” (6). In this sense, it could be argued that the rapid changing of terminology within world literature studies can be considered an argument for the field’s efforts of departing from a nationalistic ideology. According to Marko Juvan, various tendencies emerged precisely as “alternatives to the centre/periphery model of world literature”, thus, “they range from the substitution of the concept of world literature by other terms (such as transnationalism or cosmopolitanism), through the pluralization and decentralization of world literature, to the affirmation of the periphery” (*Worldliness* 6). In the case of world literature, this aspect can be attributed to the academic discourse of the past decades, influenced by capitalist globalization within which “the traveling theory of world literature has become location-sensitive in the course of its expansion” (*Worldliness* 6).

If Damrosch’s volume already responds with a cohesive theory to the question enacted by its title, further altered and reconceptualized, the case of Hana Wirth-Nesher vastly differs. Following WWII, already included in a Western paradigm, legitimized by the very concept of a Judaeo-Christian culture, the definition of Jewish

literature presents itself as rather ambiguous in the 1994 volume. Multiple factors (ethnic, religious, linguistic, thematic, historical etc.) are brought in order to define and delimitate what can be understood as Jewish literature (Wirth-Nesher 3-5). The volume doesn't attempt to give an answer to or theorize the question it poses. A rather convenient solution is to be found in the preface where the editor states that a literature's "characterization as Jewish will depend upon the reader and all of the circumstances of its reception [...] The point is, we simply cannot read outside a framework of expectations dictated by familiar categories. While the categories themselves may be unstable and problematic, they are an inherent part of the reading process" (5). I consider this ideological placement to be representative for the discourse surrounding the concept of Jewish literature in the '90s, precisely because of its uncertain nature. It stands proof for the misleading idea that the polemic regarding the concept of Jewish literature is perceived solely as a means of asserting identity, its political immediacy belonging to past conflicts (within and outside the Jewish community).

However, I believe that the criteria taken into account in the disputes tracing the borders of what is considered as Jewish literature can ultimately be reduced to three aspects still present in contemporary discourses: a *linguistic* one – concerning the language in which the text was written; an *ethnic* one – considering the origin of the text's author and a *thematic* aspect – regarding the inclusion of Jewish themes and motifs in literary text. What differentiates one definition of the term from the others is the proportion of these aspects.

In comparison with other literatures, Jewish Literature could be characterized rather by an *absence* than a *presence*: the absence of a unique language, of a single territory, or that of a shared culture (Crăciun 18). Because of this particularity, from a traditional perspective of literary studies, the concept of *Jewish literature* has never been easy to grasp. In a sense, the very concept of *Jewish literature* could be read as an *aporia*, due to the fact that it defies the logic of the nation-state. The interconnections between the professionalization of literature and the rise of nation-states, over the course of the 19th century, have left an indissociable connection between *literature* and state-language, whereas Jewishness remained for the most part of its history rather tied to a nomadic-vernacular mode of being.

In order to de-tension this incompatibility, in his 2020 book *Jewish American Writing and World Literature: Maybe to Millions, Maybe to Nobody*, Saul Noam

Zaritt proposes the term *writing* instead of the term *literature*, as it appears in the title. According to Zaritt, “To name a body of writing a *literature* enacts a comparative relation between discrete national and linguistic unities [...] *writing*, in contrast, defers such institutionalization and better reflects the instability of its component” (27). Of course, the incongruity that Zaritt wishes to avoid through terminology is not only rooted in the historical connection between literature and national linguistics. In the case of Jewish writing, another political layer is added upon the already problematic foundation, and that is the historical conflict between Zionism and Bundism (or assimilationist tendencies in general), which majorly influenced the conceptualization of a Jewish literature. It could be pointed out that *Jewishness* and *literature* seem incompatible only from a diachronic perspective. However, in the case of Jewish literature several aspects from the historical conflict tied with its initial conceptualization left their mark on the academic discourse. This aspect becomes clear by the fact that almost every researcher feels pressured, even if in subtle ways, to redefine the term, aligning or dissociating himself from certain acceptances of Jewish Literature (Wirth-Nesher 5). This tendency can be observed after WWII and even in contemporaneity. Even Zaritt’s option for writing instead of literature can be considered, to some extent, part of this tendency specific to Jewish literary studies. In other words, it has become a standard practice for studies dedicated to Jewish literature to begin by asking questions such as: what is *Jewish literature*? What makes a literature *Jewish*? What criteria should one take into account when considering an author as a *Jewish writer*?¹ However, the distinctions are rather trivial and they generally refer to the third above mentioned aspect, the thematic one, meaning, in this case, the extent to which elements relating to *Jewishness* transpire through the literary text or play a role in the text’s assemblage (Crăciun 20-21).

Out of the three aspects, the linguistic one is undeniably the most limiting. The question it raises is rather simple: is the term Jewish literature representative only for a corpus of texts written in Jewish languages such as Hebrew, Yiddish and Ladino, or the literature written by Jews in any language? Historically, arguments involving this aspect belonged to traditionalist Jews, often influenced by Zionism or other political ideologies. In contemporary Jewish literary studies, the linguistic aspect is most of the time abandoned at the outset, as it disregards the reality of the diaspora

¹ For the specific case of Jewish-Romanian literary studies (Crohmălniceanu, *Evreii* 33-42; Morar 5-17; Crăciun 16-27; Voncu 10-12).

that marked Jewish written culture since the Talmudic period. Therefore, we can safely affirm that, nowadays, the concept of *Jewish literature* defines the entire corpus of texts written by Jewish authors, regardless of the languages they are written in (Wirth-Nesher 5; Wisse 15; Crăciun 22-23).

Thus perceived, *Jewish literature* is intrinsically a transnational field of studies, the interconnections between national literature and Jewish literature(s) becoming key aspects of the research process. However, this inherent feature of Jewish Literature does not guarantee the subject's fruitfulness within the field of world literature, where Jewish literature rather remains present only by means of already major authors such as Franz Kafka or scattered representative figures for which Jewishness is perceived as a key component, as is the case of Primo Levi and that of the memorialist literature about Shoah in general. As Lital Levy and Allison Shachter point out in their 2015 article, *Jewish Literature/ World Literature: Between the Local and the Transnational*, "scholars often construe modern Jewish writing as the cosmopolitan literary culture par excellence, Jewish literatures have not received serious attention in the study of world literature. They have figured in these discussions but peripherally, through writers who embraced major European languages" (93). Clearly, alongside the internal flaws of literary studies and their specific niches, the assortment of ethnic, linguistic and thematic aspects imbedded in the discursive practices around the concept of Jewish literature pay a key role into the marginalization of the field.

Nonetheless, in this point it becomes clear that world literature studies and Jewish literary studies face the same enemy, i.e. nationalism. Both fields attempt to dissociate themselves from a nationalistic mode of thinking. The first does this by theorizing and reconceptualizing (such being the case of terms as transnationalism or cosmopolitanism). The second responds by pointing out its intrinsic international structure.

Regarding Jewish Literature, it should be first pointed out that while perceiving it as transnational, a national or ethnic pressure is exerted upon it. A pressure that is not to be found in other perspectives on national literatures. It is involuntarily imposed that *Jewish Literature* must address Jewish subjects, it has to be thematically Jewish even in the slightest, whereas French, Romanian, or Hungarian literature, for example, are not required to address certain themes in order to be considered French, Romanian or Hungarian. It is also important to note

that this pressure does not come only from a certain perception tied to national literature, it is rather developed within a general understanding of Jewishness that also affects the production and reception of literary texts. In his article *Writing About Jews*, Philip Roth answers to some of the criticism he received from the Jewish community regarding some of his short stories with Jewish protagonists. One reader from Detroit critiqued Roth based on the fact that he depicted through a character named Epstein a Jewish man committing adultery. The reader asks Roth, through a letter, if he wrote this story in order to assert that adultery is a “Jewish trait”, to which the author replied: “«Who said it was?» Anna Karenina commits adultery with Vronsky, with consequences more disastrous than those Epstein brings about. Who thinks to ask «Is this a Russian trait?»” (256). The ironic comparison is clearly used here in order to expose the general unfounded pressure exerted upon Jewish literature, which reaches absurd dimensions in this occurrence. Roth also mentions that this was not the first time when he was “convicted” for the fact that he described “Jewish adulterers”. He mentions in this sense the case of Rabbi David Seligson who disapproved of *Goodbye, Columbus* and instructed his congregation to avoid Jewish writers who depict such themes in their novels or short stories (257). Undoubtedly, morality plays a key role in Roth’s anecdote, but it should be pointed out that political and ideological implications are at the center of this debate at all times. Most often, stereotypes, discriminatory intentions or antisemitic discourses are invoked as the sources which generate attacks on Jewish literature. However, the internal conflicts present within Jewish communities play at least an equal part in this problematic. Roth’s examples are eloquent in this sense, but they reach a single dimension of a more complex problem.

Even when relating to a single geographical space in a limited timeframe, an abundance of sources that exert similar pressures towards Jewish literature clearly stand out. In the public discourse surrounding Jewish-Romanian Interwar literature as well as in the cultural press, perspectives such as the above cited one are vastly present. For the specific historical context, it should be pointed out that Interwar Jewish-Romanian literature existed in a limited timeframe dictated by two main political events: 1923, the moment of emancipation, when Jews were officially granted Romanian citizenship by the new constitution and the antisemitic laws that were passed and applied from 1934 to 1944. Direct antisemitic attacks can be found in the Romanian literary press even before 1923 and, needless to say, before

the rapid ascension of the far-right movement, which ultimately led to restraining the right to publish and the banning of their previous works.

Furthermore, even if written from a favourable perspective, multiple reviews of Jewish novels in the Romanian literary press, reference extensively aspects such as grammar mistakes or linguistic calques. Frequently, the inclusion of these aspects in the review has a sarcastic tone which indicates their connection with a subtle form of antisemitic discourse, probably due to a process of internalization of the prejudices and stereotypes. Such is the case of literary critic Pompiliu Constantinescu (1901-1946) who appreciated Jewish writers, reviewed their novels conscientiously, but always tended to end his otherwise favorable review in a sarcastic note, pointing out errors regarding the use of language (Pompiliu, I 206; II 237). Studying the different types of influences that emerged within the Interwar literary circle *Sburătorul*, conducted by the Romanian literary critic E. Lovinescu (18810-1943), Ligia Tudurachi notes that there were a lot of discussions about the certain “collocations form «the Romanian of the Jews»” (352). Those calques or linguistic habits circulated in the literary circle of which I. Peltz, Ion Călugăru and Ury Benador were all part of. As also pointed out by Ligia Tudurachi, E. Lovinescu, generally known for having more nuanced takes on Jewish literature as opposed to the other literary critics of the period, considers that only some instances of Romanian usage could be considered grammar errors, while others can actually be perceived as innovations. Responding to those attacks at the expense of his literary circle, E. Lovinescu states in his memoirs that: “antisemites should be more prudent” since most Romanian writers make use of French syntax in their works (150).

Zionist writers such as A. L. Zissu and his younger disciple I. Ludo are the ones who are recurrently concerted with theorizing the concept of Jewish literature. Traditionalists and polemic towards any assimilationist tendencies, they still argued in their publications (*Adam* and *Mântuirea*) for the importance of a Jewish literature written in Romanian. Being dissatisfied with the novels written by their Jewish contemporaries, they suggest that Jewish literature is almost inexistent in Interwar Romania, in a series of articles published from 1931 to 1935. This leads to the absurd situation, pointed out by Cămelia Crăciun, in which the two writers only include the so-called canon of “Jewish writers” from Romania (161).

As expected, autobiographical novels caused most of the debates from the Romanian literary press and the Jewish one alike. Within a certain movement of

Jewish-Romanian literature, the so-called *literature of the ghetto* (Crohmălniceanu, *Literatura* 334), two similar novels - I. Peltz's *Văcărești Road* (1933) and Ury Benador's *Ghetto 20th Century* (1934) generated rather different responses. In the Romanian literary press, both texts have been favourably received, due to the fact that they aligned with an already successful trend in Romanian Interwar literature, consisting of the depiction of marginal spaces. I. Peltz chose a naturalistic approach in his depiction of the Jewish community from the Bucharest neighborhood Văcărești (which gives the novel's title), while Ury Benador depicted in *Ghetto 20th Century* a similar medium from his hometown Brăila, using experimental narrative techniques and generally speaking in a more subjective tone. As the title also suggests, Ury Benador is subject to what Saul Noam Zaritt calls an "intentional self-ghettoization" when discussing the works of the Yiddish writer Jacob Glatstein (67-99). It could be said that, as his protagonist states in the book, for Benador "the ghetto is not a spatial, historical and decorative reality, but a spiritual one, which all of us, Jews carry in our intimate structure" (105). Following this axiom, Benador writes a very personal novel, constructed around his alter-ego Baruch Landau and the internal conflict generated by his affinities towards both Zionist and anarcho-socialist political ideas. The novel is well received by both the Jewish press and the Romanian literary press, though not as popular as I. Peltz's novel, due to the fact that, by including multiple elements specific to Jewish culture, it is not as accessible to the Romanian audience. If one were to look at the reception of Peltz's novel, the situation would seem as the exact opposite. Due to the fact that Peltz described an already acculturated medium, focusing on class struggle and marginalization, rather than on a specific Jewish identity, the novel was well received in the Romanian literary press, but not so by the Jewish press. The Romanian literary critic Pompiliu Constantinescu states while reviewing *Ghetto 20th Century*, that it was only when he read Benador's book that he understood "the arguments that traditionalist Jews brought up against the way in which Peltz presented the Bucharest ghetto" (206).

Lastly, the well-known case of Mihail Sebastian's novel *For Two Thousand Years* (1934) could not be left out of this list of examples. Sebastian's novel has a similar structure with Benador's. One of its central themes is the struggle of being Jewish in Interwar Romania. This alone would have granted him a tumultuous reception, considering the historical context, but it was Sebastian's choice to include (as a form of protest) the antisemitic preface written by his former teacher and friend

Nae Ionescu, that transformed the book into a press scandal including virulent attacks written by Jewish and Romanian writers alike. Mihail Sebastian responded to those attacks by publishing a book of essays in the subsequent year, entitled *How I Became a Hooligan*. This response, alongside the premature death of the author and the publication of his journal in 1996, sparked interest in translating the novel which granted him the dispersion into the larger field of world literature (Mihăilă 7-14).

Alongside the ethnic pressure imposed on Jewish texts, the terminology used in Jewish literary studies can be considered another indicator of the fact that while seeming transnational in its structure, the understanding of Jewish literature is still contained within the “national literature” framework. In English the terminology used for Jewish literary studies, usually follow the formula “*Jewish + X nation + literature*”, referring to the literature written in a certain national space (in some cases, also including the literature written in the Jewish languages of those places). In this sense, some terminological examples are: Jewish-Romanian literature, Jewish-Russian literature or Jewish-American literature. Of course, there are certain exceptions to this formula: the literature written in Jewish languages such as Ladino or Yiddish and Israeli literature, which includes, but is not limited to Jewish literature, as well as it being not necessarily written in Modern Hebrew. The collective assemblage of all of these literatures is generally referred to as Jewish literature, thus a transnational field of studies suited for collective research that transgresses different fields of knowledge. However, as they require a rather complex knowledge from different cultural fields and geographical areas, studies dedicated to Jewish literature in its entirety are not as present as volumes dedicated to the Jewish literature from a certain geographical area or written in a certain language.

Levi and Schachter adhere to this outlook when they refer to Jewish literature as “a microcosm of world literature in its local and global iterations” (93). I believe that it is important to note that in this acceptance, world literature studies are also reduced to an anthological exercise in praising multiculturalism, that ultimately results in the construction of new canons. An acceptance of the term which would be contrary to one of the main principles of world literature stated even by David Damrosch for whom “world literature is not a set canon of texts but a mode of reading a form of detached engagement with worlds beyond our own place and time” (281).

The English terminology is representative as it influences other fields of study from different geographical areas, however, at the same time, the terminology might

differ in other cultural spaces and, thus, partially alter the definition of Jewish literature. Such is the case of Jewish-Romanian literature. Due to the scarcity of the studies, a fixed terminology does not exist, so I will examine several occurrences. The first conceptualization could be considered that of S. Podoleanu who entitles his 1935 anthology *Romanian Writers of Jewish Origin* (*Scriitori români de origine evreiască*). It is clear that in this case, the accent falls on the ethnical aspect rather than the linguistic one, with a certain nationalist intention. On the opposite corner is situated the first comprehensive study, written, not in Romanian, but in Hebrew by the Romanian Israeli critic A. B. Yoffe, entitled *In Foreign Pastures: Jewish Writers in Romania* (בשדות זרים: סופרים יהודים ברומניה). As Leon Volovici points out in his review “The metaphorical title of the book, *In Foreign Pastures*, betrays a certain radical approach. It suggests that Jewish writers wasted their talent in alien fields, using languages other than Hebrew, and leaning toward integration in non-Jewish culture” (375). Of course, more recent studies show a more balanced depiction, but still refer to writers rather than literatures. Such is the case of Ovidiu Morar’s *Jewish writers from Romania* (*Scriitori evrei din România*), Camelia Crăciun’s *Jewish writers of Romanian language* (*Scriitori evrei de limbă română*) and Radu Voncu’s *Jewish writers in Romanian culture* (*Scriitori evrei în cultura română*). Naturally, the lack of a fixed terminology, and the particularity of the book titles are closely linked, on one hand, with the fact that all of the mentioned studies refer only to texts written in Romanian, not taking into account Yiddish or Hebrew texts, and, on the other hand, with the fact that they almost exclusively refer to the Interwar period, thus the overwhelming antisemitism of the public discourse must be a key component of the analysis.

At the same time, it is important to notice that this is not only a delimitation of the field of study but rather a specific mark of Jewish writing in Romania. It could be argued that two major historical events strongly influenced the specific development of Jewish-Romanian literature: the formation of Greater Romania, following the end of WWI and the implementation of a new constitution in 1923, granting Romanian citizenship to the Jews, which led to the late emancipation. As Camelia Crăciun points out, the Jewish minorities from all Romanian regions were far from representing a homogenous group. The Jewish community from Wallachia resembled a western influence and was mainly acculturated to Romanian, whereas The Moldavian community was more similar to the communities from Eastern Europe,

organized in shtetls and speaking the Yiddish language. Lastly, the Jewish community from Transylvania was also influenced by western culture but mainly acculturated to Hungarian or German (28-99). After the Great Union, all of these communities became part of the same nation-state. This was also a moment of effervescence in the Romanian cultural life, dominated by debates about modernity, identity and nationalism. Many writers moved to the capital city of Bucharest where they sought the recognition of their Romanian colleagues, integrating in literary circles, such as the above-mentioned E. Lovinescu's *Sburătorul* and began publishing in the Romanian literary press, hence all their works being written in Romanian. The late emancipation of 1923 further generated a desire of inclusion and facilitated their insertion into the Romanian literary life.

It would be tempting to assume that the literary avant-garde, in which Jewish writers were vastly present, could not have been influenced by national ideals, managing in a way to except the historical context, due to its destructive nature and polemic relation with literary tradition. Investigating the presence of Jewish writers in European avant-garde movements, Camelia Crăciun states that "Ideologically speaking, the avant-garde was deliberately ignoring representations of ethnicity, religion and nationality, but placed the intellectual in a generic *minority culture*, which resonated with the socio-political status of the Jewish writers" (279). The author thus explains the involvement of Jewish-Romanian authors with avant-garde or experimental movements to be influenced by their double status as „social outsiders” and „cultural insiders” (109). However, it should be pointed out that the literary avant-garde was present in Romania both before WWI (through writers such as Urmuz, Tristan Tzara and Ion Vinea) and after it, varying in its forms, from one literary movement to the other.

As Ion Pop pointed out, the first avant-garde manifesto written in Romania ("under the sign of constructivism") was released in *Contimporanul* only in 1924, thus there is "a certain temporal gap that cannot but surprise those who know, for example that the Dada movement, which broke out in 1916 at Zürich, was started by a Romanian [of Jewish origin], Tristan Tzara" (9). The avant-garde movements which manifested in Romania after 1924, constructivism, integralism and, later on, surrealism differed from Dadaism, which even if co-invented by Tristan Tzara, was not practiced it in Romanian literature (Pop 8-13).

Furthermore, Romanian constructivism was also different from its European counterparts, focusing on a lighter attitude, also oriented towards innovation. Thus, Ion Pop concludes: “the denying radicalism immediately receives an answer in the form of a positive renewal, which corresponded, moreover, to the modernization needs of Romania after the Great Union. The former Dadaist Marcel Iancu, co-director of *Contimporanul*, had quickly become aware of the fact that the quasi-nihilistic negation of Dadaism could not go too far and that positive initiatives were needed, which is why he returned to the country to participate, starting from 1922, to this work of cultural construction” (19). Therefore, the Jewish-Romanian literature of the Interwar period aligned itself with Romanian culture and to some extent its nationalistic ideals. Also, being profoundly influenced by the historical context, Jewish writers from avant-garde movements, largely, followed a similar path.

Lital Levi and Allison Schachter sustain that “Before Israeli Hebrew, Jewish languages were not associated with nation-states; nor were they globalized languages linked to the exercise of sovereign power in an international arena. They were at once local and transnational, crossing national borders while remaining confined almost exclusively to Jewish communities. That said, it would be disingenuous to suggest that because Jewish languages are non-national, Jewish literature is written entirely outside the national perspective. Modern Jewish writers working in either Jewish or standard national languages often allied themselves with Zionism or other, non-Jewish, nationalisms. Furthermore, language choice itself was often an implicit form of ideological affiliation” (96). I would like to also point out that in the Interwar period, from a minority or subaltern position, the languages used by Jewish writers, as well as the themes approached by them or their adherence to different political ideologies (from Zionism to socialism, communism or anarchism) cannot be reduced to simple choices. Rather, they should be viewed as forms of resistance, articulating an entire network of tensions which often generated the act of writing. For example, Baruch Landau, Ury Benador’s protagonist from the unfinished tetralogy *Ghetto 20th Century* is tormented by an internal conflict generated by his commitment to both radical anarchist or socialist ideas and Zionist ones. Thus, the conflict between a messianic Hebraism (along with its interconnections with leftist politics) and the concrete nationalist goals of Zionism becomes a key thematic feature of the novel. Even more so, Benador manages to contextualise the conflict within the Jewish context, by means of several characters’ representative to other polemics and

dichotomies, such as religious/secular, assimilationist/conservatory, Ashkenazi/Sephardi, Bundist/Zionist etc. In his 1937 novel, *The Trust*, the follow up to 1936 *The childhood of a ne'er-do-well*, Ion Călugăru presents his *alter-ego* protagonist, Buiumaș, as a teenager arriving in Bucharest, where he gradually becomes involved in socialist circles, without renouncing his traditional Jewish education. Even in the acculturated medium depicted by I. Peltz, the anarchist movement is presented as part of the Jewish neighbourhoods, by describing the relations between the Jewish community and the anarchist Moșeanu, identifiable as the Romanian anarchist Panait Mușiu. In terms of influences from Romanian nationalism, Ury Benador and Mihail Sebastian could be considered representative. Ury Benador was an admirer of Octavian Goga (an aspect present in terms of influence, but also as direct mention in his texts), while Mihail Sebastian's connections with Nae Ionescu and, generally speaking, with what became the far-right movement are well-known. Born in the rather cosmopolitan city of Brăila, both author conceive their identity as Romanian Jews, being, thus, representative for what Camelia Crăciun calls *double identity* (229-265).

Nonetheless, a strong argument is here at stake. According to Lital Levi and Allison Schachter, the intrinsically transnational nature of Jewish literature does not exclude the influence of nationalism upon Jewish writers. However, it should also be mentioned that a nationalistic influence does not change the minor, peripheral and subversive nature of a literature. I consider this aspect of great importance taking into consideration the ways in which the problem is approached in Jewish literary studies and world literature studies alike.

Interpreted and re-interpreted, often criticized, Deleuze and Guattari's book on Kafka remains an important point of reference in the Jewish literary studies, being also invoked by researchers in the field of World literature. However, the subtle nuances of their concept of minor literature can be easily missed when referring only to the three characteristics articulated by the writers: "the deterritorialization of language, the connection of the individual to a political immediacy, and the collective assemblage of enunciation" (18). The subversive nature of minor literature and, therefore, that of Jewish literature can be easily overlooked when reducing the theory only to a major-minor dichotomy. I will further refer to several aspects from Deleuze and Guattari's *A thousand plateaus: Capitalism and schizophrenia* in order to develop my argument. According to Deleuze and Guattari the Jew or the Jewish

subject occupies the position of a scapegoat, which is defined as “charged with everything that was *bad* in a given period” (162). Thus, a short explanation of antisemitism is enacted. But, at the same time the scapegoat “incarnates that line of flight the signifying regime cannot tolerate; an absolute deterritorialization” (163). It is in this sense that the minor, the Jewish subject becomes subversive, deconstructing a major paradigm from within by opposing it. Simply put, the very idea of Jewishness disrupts the logic of the nation-state, by exposes its internal contradictions and thus offers a way out, a possibility of deterritorialization. In this sense, it could be argued that Jewish literature follows a similar path. While subjected to the pressure of a national logic, it manages to expose its limitations and it offers a way out.

Pascale Casanova bases her critique of Deleuze & Guattari on two major arguments, the anachronism in the interpretation of Kafka’s work and the omission of his nationalist political engagement: “Deleuze and Guattari reach far back into the past to retrieve the most archaic of poetical mythologies [...] in identifying politics with revolution, they impose a modern opinion upon a writer from the past who did not share it. Unable even to imagine that nationalism was one of Kafka’s great political convictions” (204). A counterargument to such a perspective could be that offered by Lital Levi and Allison Schachter, according to which, just because Jewish literature is transnational in its structure, it wouldn’t be just to assume that Jewish writers were not involved in nationalist movements. However, a more important aspect to be taken into account would be that Kafka’s nationalism doesn’t actually contravene with Deleuze & Guattari’s theory of the minor. Kafka remains subversive exposing a nationalist paradigm from within through his deterritorialization of language.

In an interview following the publication of her 2019 book *Potential History. Unlearning Imperialism*, Ariella Aïsha Azoulay was asked to elaborate on the subject of antisemitism, considering her own identity, and the fact that the book extensively refers to Jewishness in discussing different forms of imperialism and the geopolitical context of Israel, without referring directly to antisemitism. Azoulay simply replies, stating that, as in the case of imperialism, our only solution to antisemitism is unlearning it. She is obviously referring to her own acceptance of *unlearning* as the radical imperative that her book “proposes” and “exercises” being also what “shapes the book and the political ontology it articulates” (534). Following a dialectical line of thought, Azoulay defines unlearning imperialism as an act of “returning to the initial

refusal of dispossession and the world out of which it emerged and bringing that moment into our present rather than looking for future, better anti-imperialisms” (626). Simply opposing antisemitism, which usually happens under the supposition that it is an irrational mode of thinking that no longer characterizes our culture, does not resolve the problem in question in any way and, more importantly, it also does not make us aware of similar violent political discourses.

Following this line of thought, I presume that Jewish literature, while seeming transnational in its structure, does not actually manage to escape the nationalist framework of literary studies. What it manages is simply to reveal the internal contradictions of literary studies and even those embedded in the concept of literature and nation. It manages to offer a line of flight, a way out, without fully committing to it. In this sense, I believe that Jewish literature or Jewish writing can be viewed as a means of unlearning canonical violence and imperialistic approaches in literary studies.

References:

- Azoulay, Ariella Aïsha. *Potential History. Unlearning Imperialism*. Verso, 2019.
- Benador, Ury. *Ghetto veac XX*. Alcalay & Co, 1934.
- Casanova, Pascale. *The world republic of letters*. Harvard University Press, 2007.
- Constantinescu, Pompiliu. *Scrieri*. Vol. I-II. Editura Pentru Literatură, 1967.
- Crăciun, Camelia. *Scriitori evrei de limbă română: de la rebeli marginali la critici canonici*. Editura Universității Alexandru Ioan Cuza, 2019.
- Crohmălniceanu, Ov. S.. *Literatura română între cele două războaie mondiale*. Vol.I. Minerva, 1972.
- . *Evreii în mișcarea de avangardă românească*. Hasefer, 2001.
- Damrosch, David. *What is World Literature?*. Princeton University Press, 2003.
- Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guattari. *A thousand plateaus: Capitalism and schizophrenia*. University of Minnesota Press, 1987.
- . *Kafka. Toward a Minor Literature*. University of Minnesota Press, 2003.
- Hana Wirth-Nesher. *What is Jewish literature*, Jewish Publication Society, 1994.
- Juvan, Marko. *Worlding a Peripheral Literature*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.
- . “Wordliness, Worlds, And Worlding of Literature”. *Metacritic Journal for Comparative Studies and Theory* 8.1 (2022). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24193/mjctst.2022.13.01>.

- Levy, Lital, and Allison Shachter. "Jewish Literature/ World Literature: Between the Local and the Transnational". PMLA, Vol. 130, No.1, Cambridge University Press, 2015, pp. 92-109.
- Lovinescu, E.. *Memorii*, vol. II, Editura Scrisul Românesc, 1932.
- Mihăilă, Anamaria. "An Analysis of Mihail Sebastian's Reception". Transilvania, no.2, 2018, pp. 7-14.
- Morar, Ovidiu. *Scriitori evrei din România. Ideea Europeană*, 2006.
- Pop, Ion. *Avangarda românească*. Editura Fundației Naționale pentru Știință și Artă, 2015.
- Roth, Philip. *Reading Myself and Others*. Doubleday Canada Ltd., 2013.
- Tudurachi, Ligia. *Grup sburător. Trăitul și scrisul împreună în cenacul lui E. Lovinescu*. Editura Universității de Vest, 2019.
- Volovici, Leon. "Review of In Foreign Pastures: Jewish Writers in Romania by A. B. Yoffe", in *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, vol. 88, No. 3/4, 1988, pp. 369-371.
- Voncu, Răzvan. *Scriitori evrei în cultura română*, Hasefer, 2020.
- Wisse, Ruth. *The modern Jewish Canon: a journey through language and culture*. The University of Chicago Press, 2000.
- Zaritt, Saul Noam. *Jewish American Writing and World Literature: Maybe to Millions, Maybe to Nobody*. Oxford University Press, 2020.