

Redefining the Literary Canon: The Romanian Cultural Institute

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Résumé: *En utilisant comme point de départ le contexte culturel, littéraire, historique et politique, tout comme l'initiative de l'Institut Culturel Roumain de promouvoir la littérature roumaine à l'étranger, cet article se propose de présenter la situation de l'export des écrivains roumains à l'étranger après la chute du régime communiste. Les programmes financés par l'Institut Culturel Roumain, les autres programmes développés ces dernières années en Roumanie, tout comme les initiatives de certains écrivains roumains vivant à l'étranger se proposent de faciliter l'accès du public étranger à la littérature roumaine et de favoriser la présence des auteurs roumains sur le marché international du livre. L'article se propose donc de présenter la situation de ces traductions, qui représentent une des possibilités de redéfinir le canon littéraire roumain.*

Mots clés : *l'Institut Culturel Roumain, redéfinir le canon, écrivains roumains*

Starting from the wide cultural, literary, historical and political context and the initiative of the Romanian Cultural Institute for promoting the Romanian literature abroad, this paper aims at presenting the situation of the Romanian writers' "export" abroad after the fall of the Communist Regime. The programs supported by the Romanian Cultural Institute, together with the other programs operating in the last years in Romania, as well as the initiatives of some Romanian writers living abroad are intended to facilitate the access of the foreign public to Romanian literature and to support the presence of the Romanian authors on the international book market. The paper thus aims at presenting the situation of these translations, which are, among other things, a (possible) means of redefining the Romanian literary canon.

According to Mihaly Szegedy-Maszak [1], canons play an extremely important part in creating the identity, the legitimacy and in shaping the image of a community, and the establishment and preservation of a canon is perceived as part of what we are used to call tradition. Founded on judgements of value, the canons are sets of texts that acquire the reputation of units of measurement. A certain text can be seen as part of a certain tradition only to the extent to which it represents a set of common values. And therefore, its canonicity can be defined only if analysed in terms of value, community, institutions and history. Canons are strictly related to communities and any change of canon is strictly related to the changes occurring in the communities they are developed in. The stability of a canon is closely related to the stability of the institutions supporting them. The canons also govern education and the study of the texts, which inevitably indicates the political involvement and the ambiguous role they play. At the same time, canons are indispensable to education and can also have a negative effect since they can be manipulated. Through canonisation, some books get to occupy a unique or at least a special place within a given community and each canonical work represents a decisive stage in the development of that particular community. The university curricula and translations are also important factors in strengthening the canons.

The critic Ion Simuț [2] posits that each literary age establishes its own canon, more often than not completely different from the previous one. 1918 separates the period of the great classics (the epigones and the beginnings of Symbolism) from the inter-war Modernism; 1945 announces the Prolekult; 1960 announces the Neo-modernism, and around 1980 begins (in Romania) the open offensive of the Postmodernist movement. Every literature entails thus a change of canon: on the one hand, the new era operates small changes or adjustments in the old canon, and on the other, a new canon is established. Moreover, several types of audiences demand for several types of literature, based on the principle of consumerism and pleasure. For the post-communist period, extremely eager to

consecrate the change (just like the period after 1918, 1945 or 1960) it is too early to talk about a new canon in its own rights, fundamentally innovative and well consolidated. The canon of the interwar period (the Modernist one) was destabilised by the new literature that appeared after 1945.

The Prolekult erased the interwar Neo-modernism, and entailed an acute crisis of Modernism, a radical contestation of Modernism in the years following World War II (1948-1959); then we witnessed a restoration of the aesthetic, with the clearing of the critical perspective which rehabilitated writers such as Tudor Arghezi, Lucian Blaga, Ion Barbu, Liviu Rebreanu, Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu and others. In the 1960-1970s we witnessed the simultaneous development of two phenomena: on the one hand, the interwar canon was restored and confirmed in its essential terms by the new criticism, and on the other there were the great writers of the new era, writers that aimed at a place in the new canon, the one of the Neo-Modernism. A few years after the fall of Communism in Romania, we witnessed the radical questioning of the entire literature from the Communist period. It aimed not only to change the canon, in the sense of operating changes within it, but at a radical denial, a complete substitution of the canon with other values.

The “image” of a particular literature is closely connected to the historical events taking place in that particular cultural area (for example, the historical events in Romania in the period following the 1989 revolution); also, this image can be preserved by personalities already consecrated in other fields (as in the case of Mircea Eliade, whose work was highly translated, being preceded, in the West, by the great reputation he enjoyed as a historian of religions; or in the case of Cioran, whose Romanian work was translated due to its widely known French writings). Equally, this “image” can also be easily disgraced (as it is the example of the same revolution), which makes the investments and promotions in it compulsory. All the “small”, “peripheral” countries pay great money for their “image” and “promotion”. Image and promotion means first of all adequately and responsibly inform foreign publishing houses, which need to be sent on a regular basis catalogues with selective, updated, carefully realised presentations of important books, or books that could arise an actual interest in the socio-cultural context of the target-country. A good example in this respect is the Romanian Cultural Institute and its branches in various countries. They set a good example in the promotion of Romanian culture by realising catalogues of significant titles, presented in a convincing manner and sent to foreign publishers; another notable example is the case of the Observer Translation Project initiated by the *Observatorul Cultural* (*The Cultural Observer*) magazine.

The literary text is at the same time an object of art, an object endowed with meaning, and also a kind of merchandise. Therefore, the publishers are in their turn dual characters, whose task is to reconcile art and money, the love for literature and the aim of making profit. The publishers are the ones who have the power to provide a text with a “public existence”. In other words they have the power to “recreate” a text, by the very act of publishing it, which involves, in Bourdieu’s view [3], an act of consecration, a transfer of symbolic capital.

Any text that is published in a translated version is taken out of its original context, which can never be “imported” together with the original text. More often than not, the text will be interpreted and reinterpreted, since the meaning and the function of a foreign text are determined not only by the source culture, but also, at least to the same extent, by the target culture. First, because the meaning and function of the source culture are often completely ignored; then, the transfer from one national field to another is realised by means of a set of social operations: selection (What works are translated?, What is published? Who translates? Who publishes?), a marking operation (of the demarked product) through a publishing house, a collection, a translator, the person who writes the

foreword (and presents the work, annexing it to her/his own vision, and to the area of interest of the source/ target culture); and then, there is the reception of the translated text through the process of reading, where the readers apply their own perceptions to the work, and the perceptions produced in a different context, that is, the target culture.

The entrance on the target market and in the target culture is facilitated by what Pierre Bourdieu called “discoverers”, the selectors, whose options are never “neutral”, but based on an ideal objectivity built on the criterion of value; unfortunately, more often than not they follow subjective gains, the selection being thus motivated by marketability. Besides translation proper, the propagation of the translated text on a foreign market is a complex activity in which the translated text undergoes a sinuous trajectory: the selection, the demarcation and the remarking of the text during the free circulation of ideas, which decides in fact the meaning and the function of a translation in the target culture.

Moreover, the success of a text on its origin market is never a guarantee of its success on the host market. Therefore, in order to increase the “marketability” of a translated text, publishers often resort to a “symbolic investment” in paratexts (a less known author is introduced by a notorious author in the target culture, thus the importance of forewords, afterwords, translators’ notes and editors’ notes).

Another important aspect is the synchronisation in themes and formulas with what “sells in the West”. But this synchronisation does not mean imitation; it means finding ways to promote the Romanian “specificity”, proposing some Romanian themes which could be joined to human universality.

In the communist years, there were some writers who took advantage of the contacts established with the countries having the same political system, who knew how to use the “dialogue” – strictly controlled by the official ideological dialogue – between the “allied cultures”. This explains the publishing in the Soviet Union and in Poland, Hungary and other states in the socialist camp, of books signed by authors such as Zaharia Stancu, Marin Preda, Marin Sorescu, Nichita Stănescu and others.

In the communist period, the nationalist orientation of the Romanian communism is certified by an intense translation and retranslation of the works considered to belong to the canon, considered to be classical. Especially Minerva Publishing House was in charge of publishing these translations which were produced in Romania, and then sent abroad. During the communist years, the translators from Romanian were either professional Romanian translators, or the so-called ideal formula was used, composed of one Romanian native speaker and one target language native speaker (such is the case of the 1978 edition of *Amintiri din copilărie* (*Memories of My Boyhood*), translated by Cartianu / R.C. Johnston). The orientation was mainly towards the source culture, that is, the Romanian culture. The high number of footnotes in the Cartianu/Johnston edition, in which the cultural terms were explained, aimed in fact at familiarizing the target-language reader with the realities of the Romanian culture. During the communist years, the translated Romanian literature was highly promoted towards the great European cultures.

Few were the cases of Romanian writers published in the West. One such category was formed in the 70-80s by the dissidents, the protesters, and prohibited authors living in exile: Paul Goma, Dumitru Țepeneag, Nicolae Breban. It is again personal efforts and special conjuncture that explain the more recent international success in the period following the fall of the Communist Regime in Romania, of writers such as Norman Manea, established in the United States, Matei Vișniec in France or Mircea Cărtărescu.

Starting with 2000, we witnessed an increase in the interest of the European publishing markets, a phenomenon that coincides (strangely or not) with the beginning of the negotiations for the European integration of Romania, which officially started at the end of 1999. The more and more systematic circulation of Romanian art, although still at

its early beginnings, comes from this very cultural “integration”, accompanying the political and economical ones. We witnessed an increasing demand in “translatable” Romanian literature, more and more exhibitions of visual art organised, more and more singers and bands performing on foreign stages, theatre companies performing in international festivals, and Romanian films winning numerous prizes in the last years.

What should we export? There is little agreement in this respect. Some people maintain the idea that we should focus on exporting our “specificity”, our local, strictly “Romanian” values, while others state that we can stir the interest only through forms that are 100% international, cosmopolite and “à la mode”, through copies of the recipes that are successful nowadays worldwide. Apparently different, both categories illustrate the same complex of marginality, according to which being “peripheral”, we should promote picturesque, “exotic” authors, and disguise in “westerns”. But what Romania as a European country and culture has to show is its very European normality, its diversity, and its compatibility with the “European model”, in its Romanian versions, modulated on local contexts (history, traditions, etc.).

In an era of intellectual openness, globalisation, multiculturalism and the desideratum of abolishing the borders between centre and margin, we are still facing a struggle to reach the West, that is, the centre. The centre, the West is the one who blesses, homologates, and consecrates.

Some of the research performed previously was aimed at establishing the reception of the Romanian Francophone and Anglophone works in Canada, and it took into consideration some important Canadian university libraries: Ottawa, Montréal, Quebec, University of British Columbia and Toronto. We tried to find out which the most translated Romanian authors were, and which titles were recorded in the Canadian libraries. Another important issue is related to the period in which these translations were produced and the reasons dictating their production. We also tried to answer questions related to the prevailing literary genre, the authors translated and, of course, the translators. One important outcome of the study, of particular interest for the present paper, revealed two main categories into which the translated works present in the Canadian libraries could be classified: writers belonging to the Romanian literary canon vs. modern Romanian writers, and, on the other hand, the writers of the Romanian exile. Thus, we noticed that most of the authors translated belong to the Romanian literary canon. Among these we mention for prose the names of Ion Creangă, Ion Luca Caragiale, Liviu Rebreanu, Mihail Sadoveanu, Ioan Slavici, Gala Galaction, Panait Istrati, Camil Petrescu, Marin Preda, Zaharia Stancu, Ionel Teodoreanu, Vasile Voiculescu, Mihail Sebastian; for poetry: Mihai Eminescu, Tudor Arghezi, Lucian Blaga, Marin Sorescu, George Bacovia, Ana Blandiana, Nichita Stănescu, Octavian Goga, Alexandru Macedonski, Ion Barbu; and for drama: Lucian Blaga, Marin Sorescu, Ion Luca Caragiale. There were, nevertheless, contemporary writers whose translated works are present in Canadian libraries; and we mention, in this respect, the names of Mircea Cărtărescu, Horia Roman Patapievici, Stelian Tănase, Gabriel Liiceanu, Nicolae Breban.

On the other hand, there are writers of the Romanian exile, like Mircea Eliade, Petru Dumitriu, Paul Goma, Dumitru Tepeneag, Felicia Mihali, Benjamin Fondane, Tristan Tzara, Panait Istrati and Eugene Ionesco. These writers, choosing or being forced into exile, and eager to be included into the host literary environment, often marked by the indifference of a more or less hostile audience, or by the discomfort of the exile, confronted with linguistic difficulties turned into insurmountable barriers, decide to give up their mother tongue and write in the language of their new home, that is, directly in English or French, or practising self-translation, hoping for a faster insertion into the literary field of their new home country. An interesting case from this perspective is that of

Mircea Eliade, who, writing most of his works during his permanent exile from his homeland, is world renowned for his academic work (written in French), but his literary work is less known, since it was written in Romanian. Eliade himself explains this situation in an interview: “From time to time I feel the need to seek out my roots, the land of my birth. In exile, the native land is the language, is a dream. And it is then that I wrote my novels.”[4]

Although, as it results from the table given in Annex 1, the highest number of works belongs to the Romanian writers who spent much of their life abroad (entering thus much easier on the foreign market), there are also cases where a Romanian author is present with several works in the libraries’ catalogues. In the Toronto library catalogues we counted for example 6 titles for Mihail Sadoveanu: *Povestiri (Tales of War)*, *Burdujenii (The mud-hut Dwellers)*, *Baltagul (The Hatchet)*, *Baltagul; Viața lui Ștefan cel Mare (The Hatchet; The life of Stephen the Great)*, *Hanul Ancuței (Ancuta's Inn)*, *Povestiri (Evening Tales)*, and 3 titles for Liviu Rebreanu: *Ion, Pădurea spânzuraților (The forest of the Hanged: a Novel)*, and *Răscoala (The Uprising: a Novel)*. We also recorded 4 titles for Ion Creangă, and 2 titles for authors like Augustin Buzura, Ion Luca Caragiale, George Călinescu, Ioan Slavici, Zaharia Stancu, and Vasile Voiculescu.

Prose (and especially the novel) is generally the worldwide dominant form of expression. Poetry remains of course an important sector, but in terms of mediatic importance, in terms of economic reality, number of copies and circulation, or considering the practice of reading, poetry occupies a marginal place as compared to prose. And this issue of literary genre is also taken into consideration in the present day debates on the shaping of the new Romanian literary canon.

Since 2005, the number of Romanian authors translated and published abroad has increased significantly, and many of these translations have appeared at the initiative of the Romanian Cultural Institute. The programs developed, such as the *Translation and Publication Support Programme*, the programme “20 authors”, and *Publishing Romania*, aim at promoting the Romanian literature abroad, at facilitating the access of the foreign public to the Romanian literature and culture and at supporting the presence of the Romanian authors on the international book market.

The Translation and Publication Support Programme (TPS) is addressed to the foreign publishing houses applying for a financing for the translation and publication of the Romanian authors. Through this programme (TPS) launched in 2006, foreign publishers file an application with the Romanian Cultural Institute, application analysed by a jury composed of external experts. Translation costs are financed totally, and publishing costs are also partially covered. This strategy is not one of imposing the Romanian authors to the foreign publishers; the institute offers catalogues of the publishing houses and translation samples (translations carried out by native speakers of the target language, and who benefit from translation grants), and once the publishing houses opt for a certain text, the Institute grants the financing.

The programme “20 authors” was initiated at the end of 2005 and it aims at identifying the Romanian titles that might arouse the interest of the western publishing houses. It consists of a list of 20 Romanian books, selected by a jury formed of literary critics, in order to be suggested to foreign publishers. These titles benefit from translation and publication financing.

And last but not least, there is the program *Publishing Romania* designed for the support of books or albums dealing with the Romanian art and culture, and signed by foreign authors, as well as for the support of foreign magazines that publish numbers or series dedicated to the Romanian literature.

Literary critic Nicolae Manolescu [5], president of the USR (Romanian Writers Association) and ambassador of Romania to UNESCO stated that we should count on the translation of “live” authors, on contemporaries, that is on writers such as Dan Lungu, or Filip Florian, rather than on Slavici. “We should move on to another type of politics, a more aggressive one in this field and not go on with the shy one we’re practicing at the moment”, stated Manolescu, adding that “in the end we will find a successful writer who will pull the others, just like an engine”. [6]

The grants for trainee translators are also financed by the RCI; the training sessions are carried out at the Mogoșoaia Castle, in two series of two months each, every year. The trainees, coming from Portugal, Spain, Italy, Greece, the United Kingdom, Slovenia, Poland, the Czech Republic, Serbia, Croatia, the United States, Germany, Austria are included in a training program that includes courses in Romanian literature (delivered by critic Luminița Marcu and Paul Cernat), practical courses in translation (Florin Bican), meetings with contemporary writers, translation workshops with the writers, translation workshops within the Translation Studies MA at the University of Bucharest, contacts with the literary and cultural life of Bucharest.

On the other hand, through the RCI programs, some of the Romanian classical writers, such as Mihai Eminescu, Camil Petrescu, Mircea Eliade, Mihail Sebastian, Mateiu Caragiale, Nichita Stănescu, are also translated, some of them being already available in several languages.

Moreover, the need to translate canonical writers is felt especially in academic environments, such as readerships and departments in Romanian literature and culture. And therefore, the question we need to ask ourselves is: will this separation between what “sells in the West”, what should be promoted on the international book markets, and what still needs to be studied in schools, lead to the creation of two literary canons?

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Notes

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Annex 1

Ottawa		Montréal		Quebec		UBC		Toronto	
Author	Titles	Author	Titles	Author	Titles	Author	Titles	Author	Titles
1.D.Cantemir	Online	1.D.Cantemir	Online	1.D.Cantemir	Online	1.M.Bibescu	1	1.A.Bakonsky	1
2.I.L.Caragiale	1	2.E.Cioran	1	2.I.L.Caragiale	1	2.D.Cantemir	Online	2.A.Buzura	2
3.M.Cărtărescu	1	3.I.P. Culianu	1	3.G.Călinescu	1	3.M.Cărtărescu	2	3.D. Cantemir	Online
4.E. Cioran	2	4.P.Dumitriu	1	4.E. Cioran	6	4.E. Cioran	10	4.I.L. Caragiale	2
5.I. Creangă	1	5.M.Eliade	6	5.I. Creangă	3	5.I. Creangă	2	5.G.Călinescu	2
6.I.P.Culianu	1	6.M.Sadoveanu	2	6.I.P. Culianu	2	6.I.P.Culianu	4	6.M.Cărtărescu	1
7.P.Dumitriu	3			7.P. Dumitriu	2	7.P. Dumitriu	4	7.E. Cioran	8
8.M.Eliade	16			8.M. Eliade	26	8.V. Eftimiu	1	8.I. Creangă	4
9.P.Istrati	2			9.P.Istrati	3	9.M. Eliade	23	9.I.P.Culianu	2
10.L.Rebreanu	1			10.C. Noica	1	10.P.Goma	1	10.P.Dumitriu	5
11.M.Sebastian	1			11.L.Rebreanu	4	11.P. Istrati	3	11.M.Eliade	32
				12.M.Sadoveanu	2	12.G.Liiceanu	1	12.G.Galaction	1
				13.M. Sebastian	1	13.G.Naum	1	13.P.Goma	1
				14.I. Slavici	1	14. C.Noica	1	14.P.Istrati	5
				15.I.Teodoreanu	1	15.H.R.Patapievici	1	15.G.Liiceanu	1
				16.V.Voiculescu	1	16.C. Petrescu	1	16.G.Naum	1
						17.D.R. Popescu	2	17.D.R.Popescu	1
						18.M. Preda	1	18.T.Popovici	1
						19.M. Sadoveanu	3	19.L.Rebreanu	3
						20.Z. Stancu	2	20.M.Sadoveanu	6
						21.S. Tănase	1	21.M.Sebastian	1
						22.I.Teodoreanu	1	22.I.Slavici	2
						23.D.Țepeneag	4	23.Z.Stancu	2
						24.H.Vintilă	1	24.I.Teodoreanu	1
								25.D.Țepeneag	2
								26.V.Voiculescu	2

