Finding Bessarabian Literature on the Maps of Eastern Europe. Notes on a Case of Triangular Cultural Transfer

Andreea MIRONESCU

Universitatea „Alexandru Ioan Cuza" din Iași", Departamentul de cercetare interdisciplinar – domeniul socio-uman
Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University of Iași, Department of Interdisciplinary Research in Social Sciences and Humanities
Personal e-mail: andreea.mironescu@uaic.ro

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This paper makes a case for studying the processes of intercultural transfer between Romania, the Republic of Moldova, and, adjacently, the USSR/ The Russian Federation, focusing mainly on the postcommunist period. Using the methodology elaborated by Michel Espagne (Espagne 1987; 2013), I suggest a more open reading of Romanian-language Bessarabian literature, in the wider frame of cultural transfers. Considering the geopolitics of the region and the ideological and cultural influence of the USSR in the second half of the 20th century, my paper offers a model of triangular cultural transfer between Bessarabia/ The Republic of Moldova, Romania and Russia.

Keywords: cultural transfer, literary dependence, Romanian literature, Bessarabian literature, postcommunism

Introduction

In 2011, Iulian Ciocan, a Bessarabian novelist and journalist selected in *Best European Fiction Anthology*, was making a firm personal statement concerning his own East-European literary identity: "It is hard for me to say to what extent my writing fits into a literary tradition. What I feel whenever I come up with a story, however, is that I am representative of Eastern Europe and cannot imagine my characters except as projections of the suffering, frustrations, obsessions and quirks that throng this space"[1]. For Ciocan – a writer born in 1968 in Chișinău, who studied at the Faculty of Letters in Brașov (Romania) and who published his novels at Romanian publishing houses – the Eastern European literary tradition which he feels akin to accommodates both the Russian Victor Erofeyev and the Czech Milan Kundera, but also the Romanian Petru Cimpoeșu. His literary European map also includes Scottish, Danish, Dutch, and Ukrainian contemporary authors[2]. In spite of this, Ciocan's and many other Bessarabian writers' place on the literary maps of Eastern Europe is difficult to locate.

Generally, the (Romanian language) literature from the Republic of Moldova is regarded by Romanian researches as a segment of Romanian national literature, even though there is no full consensus on this matter. Histories, dictionaries and encyclopaedias of Romanian literature treat Bessarabian authors as individual cases or, at the most, as "promotions" or "generations" of writers from the same age cohort or with a common aesthetics. The study of the interactions between the two literary systems is hence almost completely absent from Romanian literary historiography. Only recently Andrei

Terian has made several methodology proposals, to be discussed further below, for studying this particular case as a politically mediated relation of literary dependence[3].

Starting from the treatment of individual Bessarabian writers in the main histories of Romanian literature, one may infer three different types of relationships between the two. Firstly, there is *inclusion*, for instance in the *General Dictionary of Romanian Literature* (Simion 2004-2009), which indexes authors and magazines from the Republic of Moldova written in Romanian, those from the Soviet period (1945-1989) included. Secondly, there is *partial inclusion*, such as in the *Dictionary of Romanian Writers* (Zaciu, Sasu, Papahagi 1998), which indexes only Bessarabian writers debuting prior to 1940 who continued their literary career in Romania. Thirdly, there is *marginalization and exclusion*, for instance in the *Critical History of Romanian Literature. 5 Centuries of Literature* (Manolescu 2008), where Bessarabian authors writing in Romanian are indexed as "dictionary-level authors" (Mihai Cimpoi, Grigore Vieru, Ion Druță), whose "place in a history of Romanian literature cannot as yet be precisely established"[4]. In what regards transnational comparative histories of European literature, Bessarabian/ Moldovan literature is generally absent, or barely mentioned, with one exception: the Bessarabian-born writer Paul Goma. For instance, in *Literary Cultures in East-Central Europe*: *Junctures and Disjunctures in the 19th and 20th Centuries* edited by John Neubauer and Marcel Cornis-Pope, the literature from the Republic of Moldova is discussed neither as an autonomous literature, nor in relationship with Romanian or USSR literature. Also, Moldovan post-war literature has not benefited from a post-colonialist approach in the Eastern European context, although literatures from other ex-soviet republics were analysed from this perspective.

This is why determining the place of Moldovan literature on the map of South-East European literatures after the fall of the USSR is a priority objective for both Moldova and Romania and has wide macro-regional implications. Using the methodology elaborated by Michel Espagne (Espagne 1987; 2013), this study aims to analyse the relation between the literary systems of Romania and Bessarabia within the broader frame of cultural transfers, focusing mainly on the post-communist period. Also, considering the geopolitical situation of the region and the cultural influence of the USSR in the second half of the 20th century, one has to take into account the necessarily triangular relationship between Bessarabia/ The Republic of Moldova, Romania and Russia.

A case of triangular cultural transfer in Eastern Europe

In his study "Is There an East-Central European Postcolonialism? Towards a Unified Theory of (Inter) Literary Dependency", Andrei Terian differentiates among four types of "dependent" literatures in East Central Europe: 1. minority literatures, which manifest themselves inside another (national) literary system; 2. marginal literatures, which are produced by exiled or migrant (national) authors; 3. (post)colonial literatures and 4. mimetic literatures, which imitate literary models from other cultures, without being politically or linguistically dependent on them[5]. According to Terian, a literary system usually fits into more than one model of "dependence" with respect to another literary system, and it is precisely the dynamic of these relations that delineates a literature's profile in space and time. Does Bessarabian literature fit into this scheme and if so, where?

One primary observation which can be made is that Bessarabian/ Moldovan literature is "dependent" on two very different cultural systems, the Romanian and the Russian one. Also, between 1945 and 1991, USSR exerted its compelling political and ideological influence on the Soviet Socialist Republic of Moldova. Consequently, Bessarabian/ Moldovan literature can be considered, as Terian suggests through analogy with other (former) soviet republics, a minority literature (in the Stalinist period), a colonial one (between 1956 and 1991), and a postcolonial literature after the breakdown of the USSR[6]. However, if one takes into consideration Bessarabia's relationship with Romanian culture, things get trickier. Around 1918, when this region became part of Greater Romania, a Bessarabian literature in Romanian was almost inexistent, as a result of a campaign of Russianization that estranged Romanian elites and limited access to education for peasants[7]. The major modern history of Romanian literature, published by G. Călinescu in 1941, enlists several Bessarabian writers[8], while dedicating full chapters to the Bessarabian-born Al. Russo, Bogdan Petriceicu Hasdeu or Constantin Stere, who were already part of the Romanian canon. Consequently, between 1918 and 1940, Romanian literature from the province of Bassarabia can be seen not as much as a marginal, but as a *regional* literature. The situation changes completely after the end of the Second World War, when the emergent "Moldovan" literature, published in Romanian with Cyrillic letters, may be considered only retrospectively a marginal literature in relation to the Romanian one, for at the time the political hardships made this rapprochement unavowable. Finally, after 1989/ 1991, Bessarabian literature gains a new national autonomy, and, simultaneously, aspires to a (re) integration into the Romanian national literary system.

In view of all this, delineating Bessarabian literature on the maps of Eastern Europe remains a difficult task. In its case, *(inter)literary* dependence should be seen as a situation of literary/ cultural *(inter)dependence*. The reason is that Bessarabian literature is caught into a series of simultaneous "dependencies" that comingle and interact with each other, adding up to a multi-layered, complex relationship between at least three traditional actors. The relationship can best be described by using the conceptual framework of cultural transfers taking place between three statal entities bound together by a troubled history.

In its broader definition, « [l]a notion de transfert culturel implique un mouvement d'objets, personnes, populations, mots, idées, concepts... entre deux espace culturels (états, nations, groups ethniques, espaces linguistiques, aires culturelles et religieuses) »[9]. In the 1980s, Michel Espagne and Michael Werner coined the concept in order to study the "bridges" of knowledge transfer between the French and the German cultural zones from the 18th through the 20th century. The programmatic article released by the two researchers in 1987[10] puts forth all the main ideas regarding cultural transfers, while leaving room for further development in the fields of comparative cultures and literatures, transnational history, translation studies, socio-linguistics, memory studies or (post)colonialist studies. Espagne's methodology is quite opposed to the colonialist thesis of dependence and passivity of the periphery in relation to the centre, since the influence is always seen as a mutual process between poles of transfer. But it is also true that Espagne and Werner started their research of cultural transfers with the relationship between two dominant and competing European powers, Germany and France. Espagne criticizes the paradigm of cultural hierarchy, according to which a dominant culture exercises influence on a dominated culture[11]. In brief, the French scholar counters this paradigm by three main proposals:

He discusses *cultural zones* rather than nations or states, arguing that *zones* are inhomogeneous provisional configurations that allow for exploration of cultural imbrications.

Instead of focusing on the "contents" of the transfer processes, he stresses the role of its mediators, vehicles, strategies and also the contexts of dispatching and receiving the transfer.

He pleads for extending the cultural comparison from two poles of transfer to three. As such, the traditional binary dynamic of the transfers (e.g. France-Germany, France-England, France-Russia) is reshaped as a threefold dynamic (e.g. France-Germany-Russia, France-England-Germany, France-Germany-Belgium etc.).

In my view, a particular case of trilateral cultural transfer in Eastern Europe can be identified between USSR/ The Russian Federation, Bessarabia/ The Republic of Moldova, and Romania. As a border region between the Prut and the Dniester rivers, the historical region of Bessarabia, mostly occupied by modern-day Republic of Moldova, was always an object of political dispute between the medieval Principality of Moldavia, later part of modern Romania, and the powers of the region, especially the Ottoman Empire, the Tsarist Empire and USSR. The frequent change of political borders, state authority, and official language, the movement of population through soldiers, colonists and deportations, together with a specific multi-ethnic background make Bessarabia a zone of cultural imbrication and also a test case for the study of cultural transfers. There are two major influences on Bessarabia that succeed each other and overlap in the course of the 20th century: the Romanian one (especially from 1918 to 1940) and the Russian one (especially after 1945 and until the dissolution of USSR in 1991). Beyond these bidirectional cases of cultural transfer, based on a political dependence of the region on Greater Romania and later on the USSR, the relations between the last two are also an inextricable piece of the puzzle. After the end of the Second World War, Romania entered the soviet sphere of influence and until 1958 the Red Army remained on its territory. Later in the communist period, Romania adapted in various degrees the soviet model in economy, state administration, education and culture, developing its own brand of authoritarian national communism under the rule of Nicolae Ceaușescu. Of course, the processes of cultural or ideological transfer between Romania and Russia/ USSR are not limited to this period of political domination. There are numerous instances in which Bessarabian-born personalities played an important role as mediators for Russian culture in Romania, especially at times of political relaxation, when transfers were not imposed through coercive measures.

More specifically, one can differentiate among three main types of cultural transfers between Romania, Bessarabia, and USSR:

1. *A political, nationalist model* of cultural transfer between Greater Romania and the province of Bessarabia functions between 1918, when the union with the Old Kingdom takes place, and 1940, when the Red Army invades the region, which will be recaptured by the Romanians in 1941 and definitively lost in 1945. In this period, a process of "Romanianization" of the region, which had been culturally and administratively dominated by the Russian tsarist model since 1812, is taking place by means of educational reform (Romanian language education, Latin alphabet) and cultural propaganda in rural areas, which involves teachers, special activists, military, priests and voluntaries[12]. However, one of the side effects of the Romanian cultural propaganda in the 1920s was the rise of Bessarabian



Dumitru Crudu
Sursă foto: https://botanvictoria.files.wordpress.com/2012/05/dumitrucrudu_noiibarbari.jpg

regionalism in the 1930s, with the foundation of *Viața Basarabiei* [*Bessarabian Life*] magazine, after the model of the influent literary magazine *Viața românească*, founded in Iași, in 1906, by the Bessarabian-born C. Stere. One must also take into account the soviet influence in this period, which materializes especially through the creation of an Autonomous Soviet Socialist Moldavian Republic in 1924, encompassing modern Transnistria and a number of Ukrainian territories, which functioned as part of the Ukrainian SSR.

2. *A political imperialist model* of cultural transfer between USSR and the Soviet Socialist Republic of Moldova (SSRM) functioned between 1940/1945 and 1991, when Moldova pclaimed its independence. Of course, the USSR's policy can hardly be called "cultural", since the province was Russianized, especially at the beginning of the occupation period, through deportation, population exchanges and other coercive measures, but cultural propaganda was an important part of the process. Romania also belonged to the Soviet sphere of influence, but the general opinion is that relations between the two neighbours, Romania and SSRM, remained frozen until 1990. But contemporary research proves that cultural communication between the two literatures was made possible by the circulation abroad of Romanian literary magazines, and books and writers[13]. Furthermore, starting with the second half of the 1950s, Romanian classics, especially Moldovan ones (such as Russo, Creangă, Eminescu, but also Caragiale) were reprinted in Cyrillic alphabet in popular, expurgated editions, thus enabling the formation of a regional literary canon.

3. *A postnational model* of cultural transfer, governed by economic and political factors, manifests itself after 1989/1991. Despite the existence of Russian-sponsored Transnistrian separatism, bilateral cultural relations with the Russian federation are more relaxed, compared to the previous period. After the disappearance of the common cultural market controlled by the USSR, Bessarabian writers turned their gaze towards Romania, initially aspiring to total integration through political union, which will prove problematic. However, during the first postcommunist decade, the cultural presence of Russia in Moldova was far stronger than Romania's, mostly in mass media. In a second phase, a new generation of Bessarabian writers – those "born in the USSR", but educated in Romanian universities in the 1990s – starts to questions its own cultural identity and difference, which allows it to have a special place in contemporary Romanian literature.

Cultural transfers through literature

According to Michel Espagne, literature plays a crucial role in the processes of cultural transfer: « En littérature, l'accent est mis sur les traductions [...], sur des figures de l'articulation entre les traditions littéraires, sur les panthéons étrangers que chaque culture se construit, [...] sur les écrivains utilisant une langue qui n'est pas la leur »[14]. All these factors function as vectors of cultural transfers, even when their motor and medium is political and ideological. In the case under scrutiny here, there are several contextual factors, apart from the political ones, which influence and predetermine cultural transfers through literature. Some of these pertain to the systemic level, for instance the integration policies adopted by Romania after 1990. Thanks to scholarships awarded to Bessarabian students at Romanian universities, many writers to be, among which Vasile Ernu, Dumitru Crudu,

Iulian Ciocan, Mihai and Alexandru Vakulovski, came into contact with the forms of literary life in academic centres such as Iași, Cluj and Brașov, published their first books in Romania and got translated, as a result, in countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Then there are the institutional factors of cultural transfers, such as publishing houses, cultural institutes, literary awards, translations abroad mediated by Romanian vectors, and inclusion in foreign syntheses. Finally, a third level where processes of cultural transfer can be observed is an intertextual one. This is where the influence of Romanian models on Bessarabian writers, their emulation and imitation become visible, especially in the works of writers in the 1960s and 1970s generations. At the same time, it is where the will for differentiation and the edification of a hybrid identity through pastiche and parody may be witnessed, especially in texts written in the 1990s and 2000s.

Generally, Romanian and Bessarabian literary critics together agree that Romanian literature functions as a model for the Moldovan one. Starting with the 1990s, the problem of cultural synchronization with Romania has been highly debated. Bessarabian literature manifested a strong anxiety of having been "left behind" and of being ignored by established Romanian literary critics. As a result, the orientation of Bessarabian writers towards validation from the Romanian "centre" has become more and more innovative. There are several types of attitude towards the cultural Romanian model, involving alternating various patterns of self-identification and strategies of self-promotion. For instance, Bessarabian writers of the 1960s-1970s aspired to identification with their Romanian literary models and integration in the unified national canon, a strategy which proved fruitful for Grigore Vieru or Nicolae Dabija. At the same time, the generation of Leo Butnaru and Em. Galaicu-Păun, who began publishing in the 1980s and 1990s, identified with their direct contemporaries in Romania, the young postmodernists, and proclaimed their complete "syncronization" with the model. Only later it came to light that a part of their novelty might have been due to contacts with the Russian poetry of the 1960s, probably as a consequence of their education in universities at Moscow and Sankt Petersburg[15].

But the essential mutation and the advent of a non-mimetic literary behaviour took place after 2000, when literary themes and discourses from Bessarabia came to be exported back to the model culture. One of the most influential literary groups in the last two decades, "Fracturism", was initiated by a Romanian, Marius Ianuș, and a Bessarabian poet, Dumitru Crudu, who inspired the political dimension of the *Fracturist Manifesto* (1998)[16]. The reference to Velimir Hlebnikov there, in connection with more familiar American models, is no accident. The same generation also includes numerous translators from contemporary Russian authors, among which Mihail Vakulovski and Vasile Ernu, the latter being also a promoter in Romania for cultural and political ideologies of today's Russia. However, the most consistent literary contribution of this generation is forging a common literary poetics, especially in prose, that literary critics called "Basa" style. Its representatives are, among others, Alexandru Vakulovski, Dumitru Crudu, Mitoș Micleușanu and Mihail Vakulovski. Their literary poetics is characterized by colloquialism, rapid narration, violence in representation, a taste for the sordid, a tendency towards social and political protest, a discourse filled with Russian and Moldovan slang that gives Bessarabian elements an aggressive nuance and a fresh feeling, especially since the Bessarabian dialect was traditionally associated with softness and affection.

Finally, the most striking phenomenon in recent years is the importation of the "Bessarabian" style and themes into the model culture and their ensuing productivity, ranging from mimicry to the postmodern pastiche. At the end of the years 2000, several poets started exploring this niche, one of the first being Claudiu Komartin, in his lyrical cycle *Poemele cu tătuca* [*The Daddy Poems*] from his volume *Un anotimp în Berceni* [*One Season in Berceni*]. His poems develop a cynical and counter-pathetic "Bessarabian story" with obvious geopolitical overtones. For Komartin, "Bessarabianism" refers to organic impulses and the exploration of the beast-like aspects of the human nature. On the other hand, in Moni Stănilă's 2009 volume *Postoi Parovoz. Confesiunile dogmatistei* [*Postoi Paravoz. The Confessions of the Dogmatic Woman*], Bessarabian identity is connected to social and political militantism. But the most spectacular case of a transfer of cultural identity is the Bucharest poet Mihnea Rudoiu. Starting with his second volume, *Numele meu e Dmitri* [*My Name is Dmitri*] (2010), he adopted the heteronym Dmitri Miticov, used henceforth to sign all his books, a fictional Bessarabian poet from Transnistria's Dubăsari district. Komartin's, Stănilă's, and Miticov's initiative to establish their personal poetics under the Bessarabian banner signals the emergence of a new phase in the saga of Romania-Republic of Moldova cultural transfers. It is significant that, in this phase, the Russian cultural component is not played down, but brought forth as essential for the differentiation of a particular generation and for charting its spatial identity.

Note:

1. Ciocan, Iulian, "Interview at Dalkey Archive", accessed September 1, 2016, http://tiuk.reea.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1401.
2. Ibid.
3. See Andrei Terian, „Is There an East-Central European Postcolonialism? Towards a Unified Theory of (Inter)

Literary Dependency", *World Literature Studies* no. 3 (2012), pp. 21-36 and *Critica de export* [*Export Criticism*], București: Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române, 2013, pp. 279-312.

4. Nicolae Manolescu, *Istoria critică a literaturii române. 5 secole de literatură* [*The Critical History of Romanian Literature*], Pitești: Paralela 45, 2008, p. 1401.

5. Andrei Terian, „Is There an East-Central European Postcolonialism?" pp. 27-29.

6. Ibid., p. 31.

7. Irina Livezeanu, *Cultural Politics in Greater Romania. Regionalism, Nation Building, and Ethnic Struggle, 1918-1930*, Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 1995, pp. 115-116. However, translations and writings in "Moldavian" were not completetly absent before 1918. A comprehensive list can be found in Mihai Cimpoi, *O istorie deschisă a literaturii române din Basarabia* [*An Open History of the Romanian Literature from Bessarabia*], second edition, Galați, Editura Porto-Franco, 1997, pp. 23-27.

8. G. Călinescu, *Istoria literaturii române de la origini până în prezent* [*The History of Romanian Literature from its Origins to the Present*], București, Editura Semne, 2003 [1941]). Among them are C. Stamati, Alecu Donici, Pan Halippa, V. Carnavali, Al. Robot.

9. Béatrice Joyeux (2003), «Les transferts culturels. Un discours de la méthode», Hypothèses, 1 (6), pp. 149-162.

10. M. Espagne and M. Werner, « La Construction d'une référence culturelle allemande en France : Genèse et histoire (1750-1914) », *Annales ÉSC,* 4 (1987), pp. 969-992.

11. M. Espagne and M. Werner, p. 970.

12. See Irina Livezeanu, *Cultural Politics in Greater Romania*, pp. 100-120.

13. See Igor Caşu, *Politica națională în Moldova sovietică: 1944-1989* [*National Politics in Soviet Moldova: 1944-1989*], Chișinău, Cartdidact, 2000, pp. 45-56 and Mihai Cimpoi, *O istorie deschisă a literaturii române din Basarabia* [*An Open History of Romanian Literature in Bessarabia*], pp. 189-253.

14. Michel Espagne, «La notion de transfert culturel», *Revue Sciences/ Lettres*, no. 1 (2013), p. 5.

15. See Nicolae Leahu, „Optzecismul din Basarabia și poezia șaizeciștilor ruși" [1980s Bessarabian poetry and Russian 1960s poets], *Metaliteratura*, no. 1-2, 2007, pp. 11-14.

16. Dumitru Crudu, Marius Ianuș, *Manifestul fracturist [Fracturist Manifesto]*, http://asalt.tripod.com/a_086.htm, consulted on September 1st 2016.

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