REVIEW: Romanian Literature as World Literature

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Romanian Literature as World Literature, edited by Mircea Martin, Christian Moraru, and Andrei Terian aims to fill a major gap in local literary research and, most importantly, to offer a more exhaustive and diversified view on Romanian literature in relation to the international stage of canonized authors from different cultures. While the virtually disregarded position that Romania takes on this 'stage' could be reckoned as shortcoming, this contribution provides a significant plethora of different views and insights on Romanian literature, as well as its impact in relation to Europe's undying figures of literature.

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"World Literature" is a term broadly used to designate a global conceptualization of canonical literature in relation to the world's different spectrum of literary and cultural traditions. World literature does not encapsulate the conglomeration of all the literary works in the world, but rather only the very best works from the world's different literatures, especially those which have not been thoroughly studied beyond their native scope. It incorporates not only the "major" literature belonging to Western Europe, but also the "minor" ones which have been overlooked, or superficially studied, as they pertain to Europe and North America. The idea of *Weltliteratur* came as a result from adjoining the Enlightenment cosmopolitanism with Romantic cultural nationalism and, since around the 1800s, it has established a growing system of transnational circulation of texts, beyond their linguistic barrier. Romania, on the other hand, is still considered to be a "peripheral" culture. Thus, this volume aims to bring Romanian literature in the spotlight by treating it as "a particular nodal point" pertaining to a larger unit, whose nuanced understanding has been reduced to a simplistic view of the cultural mechanics.

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The volume is divided into three parts, each having a different scope and purpose. The first part, "The Making and Remaking of a World Literature: Revising Romanian Literary and Cultural History," deals with the post-communist era when Romania tried to find its place among Europe but it was often regarded, as Mihai Iovănel puts it, too "Balkan" or not "enough" European, and in relation to Hungary or Bulgaria it was considered "too peripheral." Turning Romania into a "viable cultural form" became an obsessive mission for post-communist Romania and it has since been taken up by a spectrum of different voices, so as to make Romania be heard and recognized alongside the other major European cultures. The second part, "Literature in the Plural", regards our heritage, as Mircea Martin states, not only our own heritage as a nation, but our "external" heritage as well, and how much of it we are willing to incorporate into who we are. The third part, "Over Deep Time, Across Long Space," concerns the national space, which is

finite when it comes to research, says Alexandru Matei. The space required is, "as the Renaissance taught us, supranational", and it expands across continents.

In this review, a number of two essays will be thoroughly analyzed, as they illustrate best this volume's area of interests. The first one is written by Andrei Terian, and it can be found in the first part of the volume. His essay, "Mihai Eminescu: From National Mythology to the World Pantheon," tackles the problem of Romania's national poets affiliated to World Literature. As he puts it, the authors acknowledged internationally are chosen based on an internal set of criteria, not on a culture's canonized authors. In the case of the poets, Terian states that the national poet, in certain situations, "*in order to become and be acknowledged as* such take the longer, international and even intercontinental road home to national recognition and, in our case, idolatry." Firstly, his point is that before the prestige of being called a "national poet", more often than not, a detour through the world archive is needed in order to display the vast horizon which expands beyond the national territory; an intertextual frame which aims to reach new and surprising directions.

Secondly, a comparison between the national poet stature and the prestigious models in Western Europe is drawn. For instance, Karel Hynek Mácha is known as "The Czech Byron", or Hristo Botev as "The Bulgarian Victor Hugo"; this becomes an impediment in the formation of the smaller cultures, which want to gain a place on "the international stage" because they are constantly compared to renown authors. Thirdly, being a "national poet" needs certain delimitations from other authors because only such a "compare-and-contrast routine" can guarantee that the poets are truly national poets and not just mere copies of Czech or Bulgarian transnational poets.

Next on, Terian crystalizes his aforementioned statements by introducing a sketch of Romania's beloved genius, Mihai Eminescu, "whom Romania's critics regard as one of a kind, nonpareil, alpha, and omega of all things literary". As he was born in 1850, the "national rebirth" of his country had already taken place, so he couldn't be considered a revolutionist- politically-wise. He was noticed by Titu Maiorescu, the greatest literary critic at the time, and he joined *Junimea* [The Youth], which unlike the other nineteenth century societies had a conservative orientation, as opposed to a liberal-progressive agenda that the others had. If the East-Central Europe societies which perceived France as the "world's emancipation engine," *Junimea* was entirely pro-German.

However, before Eminescu, there was another poet who was in the spotlight during his time, on a national scale: Vasile Alecsandri. Truth be told, he was "overqualified" for the position as he played major roles both during the 1848 Revolution in Moldavia and in the unification of the Romanian Principalities. Not to mention that he wrote in all literary genres of the time more than honorably, with Maiorescu calling him "the leading poet of the last generation". Thus, Eminescu would compete with him for the "national poet" status.

The first part of his writings are dedicated to imitating the classic, eternal authors such as Homer, Shakespeare and Goethe. Of course, his attempt was doomed to fail as he considered that his literary talent was no match for these pinnacle figures of literature. First he tried to tackle Romanian history in a heroic or tragic manner, but he abandoned his work, which forces us to conclude that these endeavors ended up in failure. As he considered Shakespeare to be "the greatest poet who has ever walked the Earth," Eminescu was fully aware that "an imitation of the English writer would result in an epigonic product." Inspired by Goethe, Eminescu wanted to create a Faust-based dramatic poem, but the result was somewhat paradoxical, as he admitted that this attempt was "similar to Faust, but not really", this being the reason he abandoned this project as well. Young Eminescu was tormented by this impossibility of reaching zenith, from a literary point of view, as his ancestors did.

Moreover, in "Memento Mori. Panorama deșertăciunilor" [Memento Mori. The Panorama of Vanities] the question regarding Eminescu's beliefs is answered: "The explanation behind the sad face dooming all civilizations is biological rather than moral." Eminescu is deeply influenced by Arthur Schopenhauer's pessimism, who perceived history as a phenomenological result, an expression of the individual Will and thus, a spectacle of the universal Evil, which is unleashed by "the instinctual selfishness secretly governing humankind."

Eminescu's exposure to Hinduism is what, finally, molds him as a poet. At the end of the 1870s, he started to intertwine the ancient Hindu texts to Romanian folklore tradition, or at least, he found a common ground between the Hindu and Romanian cultural heritage. Finally, Eminescu outlines his "three sources" or "masters" that shaped him as a poet: Shakespeare, whom he calls "the gentle brother of my soul"; "a wise man" – whose name remains unknown – but we do know that he helps him find the solution for the "end of the world" problem (some scholars stated that the "wise man" is most likely Schopenhauer); and last but not least, the "untold", but he or she taught him more than Shakespeare did (some scholars claimed that this must be the woman he loved, while others stated that he must refer to the spiritual wealth that Hinduism has brought upon him).

"India enabled him to find his own voice," though he never traveled there, Eminescu is one of the first writers to *de-Orientalize* India, as he also attempted to *re-Easternize the West*. "Eminescu looks for the nation but finds the world" which proves to be of a more complex nature than the world alone. Even though he started out as being unsure of his status as a national poet, in the end he is shaped perfectly to occupy this position, because – as Terian states – "Eminescu reads *world*

literature as Romanian literature and, conversely, writes *Romanian literature as world literature*."

The second essay, "Made in Translation: A National Poetics for the Transnational World," written by Mihaela Ursa, deals with how translations are perceived in Romania in the post-Cold War era. If up until 1990 translating into Romanian and other Central and East European languages had been – with some exceptions – part of a "national project," translation initiatives started to be carved, in and around Romania, not by the nation-state, but by book markets, major publishers and so on. Her point is that during the last three decades, translation in Romania started to switch from the nationalist one to "a range of uncoordinated microprograms", which started to convert into a transnational domain. As Ursa states, voicing the opinions of other critics as well as hers, "translation literally do make a literature," whether we take literature domestically, or we contrast it with the "ever-morphing literary world-system."

Translation and the collective identity became interconnected during the post-Romantic era and so, the process of translating from a foreign language is meant to "encapsulate certain defining values of a group," and that, conversely, one should take into consideration that the common features of a community must be rendered, either ethnically or nationally. In Romania's modern translational traditions, those features can ultimately be divided into two categories: the first one is more "emphatically ethnographic" when the object of translation pertains to a "minor" or Central-East European cultures, and when the translation into Romanian is meant to purely satiate the curiosity of exploring 'the otherness'. The second category is thought to be "less anthropological" and is dedicated to the major literature, that which circulates on a global scale; they are "reincarnations of universal cultural models."

Ursa cites David Damrosch, stating that although most important works cannot be considered a core, original part of national literature, their rendition into that literature became a turning point within their tradition, as it helped shape the nation into its final form, which we know today. Otherwise put, while some Romanian cultural ideologues have manifested their skepticism towards the impact that other literatures may have, as it turns out, that contribution in relation to the national literary wealth, became "a tool of cultural advancement," paving the way for the in-depth development of the nation. A Romanian critic, Constantin Dobrogeanu-Gherea, saw the clear interconnectedness of the national and the translational, claiming that "translating is creating," and so, for this reason, one who translates is truly an artist. On the other hand, a leading critic, ideologue and politician of the Romantic era, Mihail Kogălniceanu famously stated that "translations do not make a literature" because it stifles the flame of our creativity as a nation.

However, Eugen Lovinescu had a different perspective to that of the aforementioned, believing that translation gives the nation the opportunity to equally settle itself amongst the other European cultures because it "is not only a tool of identity formation but also an instrument of identity differentiation." Slowly, translation began to be assessed as a productive tool which, ultimately helps reinvent the work, or even better, reshape it from a different ethnolinguistic point of view.

Further on in this essay it is nuanced how these different perspectives on translation helped make the world a home and at home inside Romanian literature. This shift was a slow work in progress though, as for almost the entire rest of the twentieth century the process came to a halt. However, *Weltliteratur* started to impact the Romanian universities, but this concept was filtered through the Sorbonne as *literatură universală* (universal literature) which came with its geosymbolic peaks and valleys, which was ultimately coated by the nationalist pecking order as "universal".

The post-Cold War situation in Romania was thorny in the sense that translators, publishers, and critics found themselves too close to their comfort zone, intellectually and otherwise speaking. As the war brought about a radical, brutal change, it is clear now to observe why before 1940, translation in Romania has been less debated than simply done.

All in all, such processes are needed and requisite in the formation of a nation and a nation-state, as "translation is a steppingstone in any nation building." Writers dare us to imagine innovative ways of creating bridges between the original and the translated work, unifying the two in a harmonious way, which delves into one's creativity and originality because, as Daniel Damrosch puts it, "the national language itself is the medium through which original and translated work circulate together to form our ineluctably international national literatures."

Romanian Literature as World Literature proposes, as it had been demonstrated, a collection of essays which explore the issues related to the manner in which Romanian literature is regarded as part of the world literature's corpus. It exhaustively examines and clearly displays the magnitude and value of Romanian literature, as it is more often than not regarded as "peripheral" or not European "enough". Furthermore, this volume gives voice to our heritage as Romanians by making our literature transnational. The multifaceted approach gives way to both a comprehensive overview of this challenge and development associated with Romanian literature read as world literature, which proves to be important for future research and reflection.

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