Nationalizing International Prestige: Foreign Literatures in Romanian Interwar Periodicals

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Abstract: Drawing from recent developments in the field of World Literature, but also earlier attempts at mapping local cultural traditions, contexts, and affinities, our proposal attempts to investigate the dominant patterns of cultural criticism within the literary publications active during the interwar period. Using an exhaustive resource of metadata related to the relations between Romanian literature and foreign literatures developed over the span of twenty years, we plot a network abstraction focused on revealing patterns and trends of reception within Romanian cultural magazines. This process of "topic modeling" cultural criticism will serve to illustrate the dominant subject matters present in the Romanian cultural press. Following our data analysis, we will attempt to provide an explanatory model of "theory production" in Romanian literary culture that accounts for the seemingly "ahistorical" nature of autochthonous localizations.
Keywords: topic modelling, periodical communities, Digital Humanities, cultural criticism, Romanian literature

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Echoing two famous studies published at the beginning of the 2000s,[1] Galin Tihanov states, in his latest book: "Modern literary theory was born in the decades between the World Wars, in Eastern and Central Europe."[2] If this is true, then the first question raised by anyone who investigates the Romanian cultural space is: where can we find modern literary theory in Romania between the two World Wars? Recent investigations into the history of theoretical thought in the country attributes the quasi-absence of formalist or structuralist critical systems to the overarching influence of French culture and its own theoretical tendencies, caught between positivism and intuitionism.[3] The location of theory in Romanian interwar culture is therefore victim to the same theoretical shortcomings, and traceably to a particular venue common for all modern cultures: the literary magazines. Not only did modern Romanian magazines aid in disseminating artistic modernism, while also doubling as platforms of socio-political critique; they also served as the main scene for critical and theoretical debates. Using this premise as the starting point of our investigation, we will attempt to plot, by computational means, a statistical model that will reveal the abstract "topics" that occur in Romanian cultural magazines between the World Wars. This type of exploratory analysis, better known in the field of computational literary studies as "topic modeling", sheds light on the elective affinities between Romanian culture and Western cultural trends, while also revealing some striking patterns in the reception of various cultural phenomena. More importantly, we believe that this approach might help understand the interactive model of national cultures underpinning the dynamic transnational space of the first half of the twentieth century.

Corpus and methodology

We find it important to state the general guidelines for the present study, since the results under scrutiny require a great deal of contextualization.[4] First, the "corpus" upon which we base our analysis does not consist of the actual cultural magazines in question, but of a series of referencing and bibliographical entries indexed in a lexicographical instrument. The *Bibliography of the Relations between Romanian Literature and Foreign Literatures in Periodicals 1919-*

1944 is probably the most comprehensive reference database created for the purpose of comparative literary studies. The ten volumes that make up the Bibliography consist of over 80,000 articles from over 700 Romanian periodicals, with comprehensive classifications based on thematic and national criteria. Published between 1997 and 2009, it offers a full account of the Romanian reception of modernist factions and of a period when magazine culture was at its peak. The sheer potential of this instrument has not, as of yet, been exploited, but some preliminary attempts in the study of avant-garde phenomena have been made.[5] The *Bibliography* illustrates the stringent necessity of digitizing Romanian inter-war periodicals in their entirety, an endeavor that is expected to be still out of reach for years to come. Second, the articles taken into consideration for the present topic modeling were selected following an "anational" logic. While most of the entries found in the bibliography deal with national literatures (French, English, German, Polish, Hungarian etc.), the first volume of the *Bibliography* relates to universal matters such as literary theory, aesthetics, genre theory, literary currents, or comparative literature, and thus offers a more "democratic" insight into the general critical and theoretical trends prevalent in Romanian culture. Third, we did not take into account literary reviews, since the central topic of those articles were authors and their works. While a network of cited authors in Romanian culture could indeed help in establishing more detailed patterns, we believe that such an endeavor is an altogether different subject matter, albeit very useful even in regard to our analysis. Finally, some hyper-specialized topics did not make the cut in our investigation, because they did not meet a certain quantitative quota. During our data collection, a series of topics that garnered fewer than ten articles emerged in our network, and as our interpretation advanced, we have found that these topics did not meet the necessary requirements to be included in the two categories that we have devised for the analysis.

With that in mind, out of the 6455 articles included in the first volume of the *Bibliography*, only 2193 have been processed, the rest of them having topics that are either too nationally oriented, too minor, or are not topics at all (i.e., literary reviews). Out of the 2193 articles, we managed to extract 90 topics (Table 1) spanning 268 magazines from all regions of Greater Romania (Bessarabia included). This data was mined from the *Bibliography* following its digitization, since in its analog form, any exploratory data analysis would have been painstakingly difficult to achieve. With all the necessary information at hand, this tool can be used extensively for a comparative analysis of literary influence and popular trends within Romanian modernist culture. The only downside concerning this lexicographical project is that it understandably lacks an equally comprehensive counterpart covering the reception of Romanian literature abroad. Another shortcoming is that the cited articles are only concerned with literary topics, rendering interdisciplinary investigations problematic. However, in this apparent drawback lies the very basis for our investigation. Being an indexing instrument concerned with *topics*, a topic modeling approach seemed like the obvious choice for a quantitative approach based on this instrument.

In the humanities, one of the earliest examples of topic modeling belongs to Sharon Block, who, alongside David Newman, employed topic-modeling procedures to explore an eighteenth-century newspaper, the *Pennsylvania Gazette*. The historian also offers a comprehensive description of the process:

> "Topic modeling is based on the idea that individual documents are made up of one or more topics. It uses emerging technologies in computer science to automatically cluster topically similar documents by determining the groups of words that tend to co-occur in them. Most importantly, topic modeling creates topical categories without a priori subject definitions. This may be the hardest concept to understand about topic modeling: unlike traditional classification systems where texts are fit into preexisting schema (such as Library of Congress subject headings), topic modeling determines the comprehensive list of subjects through its analysis of the word occurrences throughout a corpus of texts. The content of the documents – not a human indexer – determines the topics collectively found in those documents."[6]

Recent developments into this type of exploratory data analysis applied topic models to literature as well, including explorations of French classical and Enlightenment drama[7], and Spanish poetry[8]. One of the more daring attempts at employing topic models in literature deals with the investigation of the correlations between topics and judgements of literary quality in a sample of bestselling Dutch novels[9]. However, for the purpose of the present paper, we will not delve into the specific uses of the method in computational literary studies. Because the corpus does not consist, as we already pointed out, of the real documents, but an indexing instrument, only the core principle of topic modeling governs our inquiry (tokenized topics rendered through networks or graphs), and not its technical features (unsupervised data collocation, automated semantic clustering, NLP integration) present in other similar endeavors[10]. The reasons are obvious: having a "human indexer" as an intermediary between the corpus and the analysis makes it easier to catalog the topics in question. Furthermore, the nature of the *Bibliography* makes indexing the topics a lot easier, since the descriptions that accompany every entry are very detailed in terms of an article's subject matter. This is why, unlike more traditional referencing schemas (such as the ones used in bibliographies created by national libraries), the scope of the *Bibliography* is comparative, thus determining the structure of the descriptions.

Aestheticism	Modernism
Aesthetics (general principles)	National specificity
Children's and young adult fiction	Naturalism
Classicism	Originality
Dada	Poetics (general principles)
Decadence	Pornography in literature
Expressionism	Psychoanalysis
Fictionalized biography	Psychologism
Futurism	Realism
Hermeticism	Renaissance, humanism, baroque
Impressionism	Romanticism
Literary criticism	Surrealism
Literary generations	Symbolism
Literary genres	The relationship between art and morality
Literary Techniques	The social function of literature
Literary theory	The writer's condition
Literature and politics	Theory of fiction
Literature and religion	Traditionalism
Modern novel	Translation
Modern poetry	Work of art

Table 1. List of topics that have over 10 occurrences in Romanian cultural magazines 1919-1939

In order to visualize the processed topics, we employed *Gephi*, a software that renders, in the form of a network (Fig. 1), the physical properties informed by the relation between the topics and the magazines via "weighted degree" (i.e., the quantity of articles on a specific topic written in a specific magazine). In order to cluster the topics and magazines, we applied a modularity statistic, which assesses the number of distinct groupings within a network and parses the nodes of the network into distinct groups. The purpose of a modularity statistic is to group nodes based on the strength of their relationships, thus creating "communities"[11] that make visualizing the relations between groups of magazines and certain topics easier.

The patterns that emerged following the clustering process led us to identify two distinct sets of "topic reception" in the Romanian cultural magazines, which we grouped following two self-devised metrics. The first is the *index of theoretical circulation* (ITC), which refers to the ratio between the number of articles published on a topic and the *total* number of magazines that published articles on that topic throughout the interwar period and throughout the lifespan of a publication. For instance, a topic such as *translation* (which concerns all articles written about theories of translations, the cultural importance of translation, the value of translated works etc.) consists of 285 articles in 99 magazines, then the $ITC_{(Translation)} = 2.87$. A high ITC (above 2) indicates a topic that generates significant debate in a source culture, while a smaller ITC (between 1 and 1.99) indicates concepts, themes or debates that have not been consolidated. The second metric is the *Index of cultural novelty* (ICN), which refers to the ratio between the number of articles published on a topic and the number of magazines that published *only one* article on that specific topic. A low ICN, between 1 and 1.99, indicates a high level of novelty within a given source culture, whereas an ICN above 2 indicates a well-known topic in that source culture. For instance, the ITC of *translation*, which has, out of the 99 magazines that debate it, only 49 publications that cover it *only once*, has an $ITC_{(Translation)} = 5.81$, indicating that it is a topic with a very low degree of cultural novelty. As will be shown below, many topics that have a high index of theoretical circulation will have a very low degree of cultural novelty, indicating a correlation between the two variables. However, this is not necessarily true for all topics. For instance, *classicism* has, by the sheer historicity of the topic, a low degree of cultural novelty, but also scores very low on the index of theoretical circulation, indicating a topic of little interest for theoretical debates in the cultural space. Oppositely, the topic of *modern poetry* scores highly in the *index of cultural novelty* but has a high *index of theoretical circulation* as well. Furthermore, one must take the semantic implications of these metrics with a grain of salt, as "old" topics may constitute *novelties* in the Romanian culture, without them actually being extremely new in other cultural spaces. The opposite is also true. *Futurism*, for instance, is a relatively novel concept, being an early twentieth century avant-garde movement, but the sheer number of articles dedicated to the current ever since its creation in 1909, as well as the high frequency of articles covering it, give the topic a relatively high ICN (2.3). Conversely, other avant-garde movements such as *Expressionism*, *Dada* and *Surrealism* do not fare as well, with ICN's below 2. This is because Futurism, far from being a novelty during the 1920s and 1930s, had a very interesting reception in Romanian culture, an account that

has been detailed recently[12] (Modoc, Traveling avant-gardes 45-61). In order to render the relative positions of these topics with the two metrics in mind, we plotted two scatter graphs with a reference line (Fig. 2, 3). These concepts might make clearer the dynamic of modern thought in Romania, as they reveal two ways of reading world literature in the period, as well as the distinct affinities between Romanian culture and certain topics.

Data analysis and interpretation

Perhaps one of the most interesting aspects regarding the reception of different topics in the Romanian cultural space concern the "topical communities" that emerge from a network analysis. Based on the clustering algorithm applied to the network, our data analysis revealed fifteen such communities, each of them having a dominant topic and a series of secondary topics (see Table 2).

Dominant topics	**Clustered secondary topics**
Literary genres	Neoclassicism Sămănătorism Critical impressionism (Intuitionism)
The writer's condition	Surrealism Cubism Dada Constructivism Memory Sensibility Experimentalism Literature written by women Literature and revolution Theory of fiction Work of art War in literature
Futurism	Expressionism The "proletarization" of art Fictionalized biography Literary movements
Literary criticism	Classicism The professionalization of literature Neoromanticism
Aesthetics	Historicism Philosophy of culture Literary Theory History of aesthetics Organicism
Modern poetry	Syncretism
Modern novel	Synchronicity Hermeticism
The social function of literature	Art history Dandyism
The relationship between art and morality	Aestheticism Didactic art Literary trends

Pornography in literature	Positivism Decadence Traditionalism Authenticity Intimism Literature and politics
Romanticism	Milieu Poetics
Literary techniques	Imitation Nihilism Censorship Folklore aesthetics Renaissance, humanism, baroque Body poetics
Translation	Philology Intercultural relations Literary generations Thematic criticism Literary salon Weltliteratur (Goethe) Literary Ideology
Symbolism	Literary geography Magical realism Literary sociology The discourse of crisis Psychoanalysis Psychologism Naturalism National specificity Realism Impressionism Orphism
Modernism	Originality Socialist realism Cosmopolitanism Historical materialism

Table 2. List of dominant topics and their respective community members

One might be quick to point out (and rightly so) the relative lack of coherence between the discussed topics. After all, a community that brings together Symbolism, realism, and psychoanalysis does not make much sense. However, these clustered communities only show topical tendencies of specific groups of magazines and a diversity of topics point toward the multi-faceted specializations of some publications. Another aspect to be taken into consideration is the frequency of the articles. For instance, the magazine that organizes the topical community related to Symbolism is *Adevărul literar și artistic*, a daily newspaper in which one can find articles on almost all the topics. However, since frequency determines the strong ties between nodes, and modularity serves to single out these ties, the algorithms will shape the clusters.

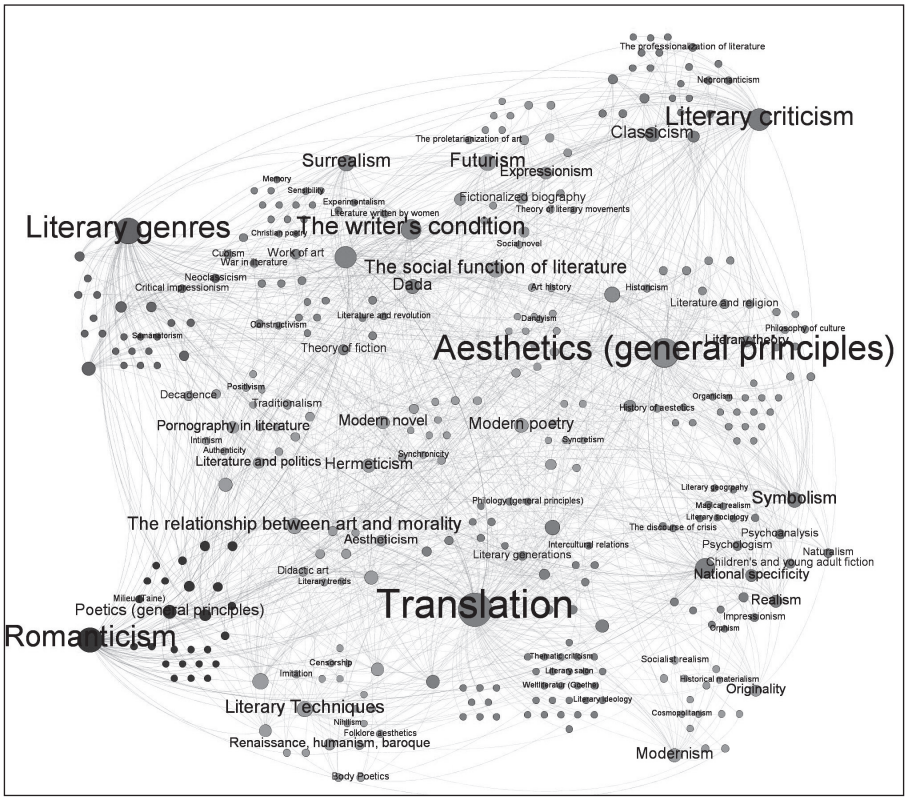


Figure 1. Clustered network of the main topics covered in Romanian cultural magazines between 1919 and 1939. The larger the font, the higher the number of articles written on the topic

Although the secondary topics pose questions related to topical coherence, the dominant ones are perhaps the most revealing in terms of patterns and trends in Romanian interwar culture. The most heavily invoked topic in Romanian periodicals is, by a significant margin, *translation*. The preeminence of the topic in the period is, however, explainable through the country's translational culture[13]. Andrei Terian pointed out, in a study dedicated to Romanian novel production throughout its entire history, from a point of view taking into account the ratio between produced and translated novels, that "the second stage" of novel production (1918-1947) corresponds to a post-war "crisis", and then a "boom" of production in the 1930s[14]. It is for the first time in Romanian culture that there are more domestic novels than there are translated ones. Yet, the topic of literary translation still dominates the cultural discourse of Romanian journalism. This phenomenon confirms Brian Baer's assumptions with respect to the cultures of East-Central Europe as "cultures of translation", whose tenets are predicated upon "the notion of a communal identity retrieved through translation (...), a heroic metaphor representing a triumph over perceived backwardness and as a way to survive."[15] Romania is certainly the rule and not the exception, since even though there are fewer translated novels in the period there is still a high number of translations of poetry or shorty stories in the magazines (approximately 18260 literary texts translated from over 26 languages between 1919 and 1944). Therefore, in a sense, translating foreign literature trumps the meta-discourse dedicated to translating foreign literature, but also overtakes any other sort of meta-discourse. Perhaps translation does "make" a literature, after all, since, as Mihaela Ursa puts it, "the development of a translational corpus was part and parcel of nation building"[16] in the Romanian space.

As for other dominant topics, the underlying explanation remains fairly the same. Discussing Romanticism is well within the bounds of self-legitimization, since nation building tendencies go hand in hand with Romantic ideals of collective identity and standards of "universality." Likewise, aesthetics served to bolster the Romanian literary critics' intuitionist and anti-positivist leanings, while also doubling as a projective and legitimizing narrative that reinforced the autochthonous cultural politics. Other dominant topics such as *literary criticism*, *literary genres*, or *literary techniques* are part of Romanian criticism's metacritical turn from the first half of the twentieth century and point to its modern institutionalization[17].

Moving on to the two metrics described at the beginning of the paper, we aim to illustrate the distribution of topics in relation to the two indices. The working hypothesis for the devised indices was that a topic's *prominence* in a given national culture is not determined by the actual prestige of the *target* culture, but on a selective logic belonging to the *source* one. And indeed, Figures 2 and 3 do show that there is a statistically significant correlation between a culture's general tendencies for the reception of foreign cultural phenomena and its perceived prominence.

The first Index that we want to highlight concerns what

we called "theoretical circulations", or more specifically *what* topic is likely to generate debate in Romanian cultural criticism (Fig. 2). We used a reference line in order to point out topics that are above or below the required ITC. Thus, topics such as *Translation* (2.87), *Romanticism* (2.53), *Literary genres* (2.44), or even *Modern poetry* (2.44) are topics that are likely to generate debate in the Romanian cultural space, while avant-garde movements such as Futurism or Surrealism have a fair amount of articles, but do not generate productive debates in the field. Literary historiography confirms this pattern, since the reception of the avant-garde in the Romanian culture is known to be lacking. This also relates to the absence of theoretical debates surrounding formalism or structuralism in the country, since, as Galin Tihanov states, "avant-garde literary practices – not at all specific to Central and Eastern Europe – demanded and triggered the process of their rationalization in literary theory."[18] Another interesting pattern concerns the differences of diffusion between *modern novel* and *modern poetry*. There are almost twice as many articles on modern poetry than there are on the modern novel. This tendency reflects the evolutionary stage of the novelistic genre itself, since the 1920s were quite poor in terms of novel production, despite the publication of many valuable works such as Rebreanu's *Ion* and *Pădurea spânzuraților,* or Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu's *Concert din muzică de Bach*. However, during the 1930s, the Romanian novel displays an astonishing growth rate, without an equally significant theoretical debate being active in the background. This paradox is as unexplainable as the fact that the genre's peak coincides with the beginning of the economic depression, as Terian aptly notes.[19]

As for the second Index, that of "cultural novelty," the position of the truly new topics is fairly understandable, with Dada, Surrealism, Expressionism, and even Hermeticism evincing some of the highest levels of cultural novelty (while also illustrating the quasi-absence of any applied debate concerning these topics). The case of these artistic -isms in the country reflect the dominant cultural and critical discourse of the era. For instance, two of the most important Romanian critics active in the period, E. Lovinescu and G. Călinescu, approached them as either part of an amorphous mass of "extreme modernist" productions[20] or as movements that were overly focused on form and with little to no artistic content[21]. However, since neither *modern poetry*, nor *modern novel* are "novel" topics for the period in question, it is interesting to see how their position in the chart reflects the closeness of their semantic content while at the same time scoring differently in the ITC. Similarly, the case of Futurism is exemplary in how a topic such as an avant-garde current is very familiar in the Romanian cultural field (with an ICN of 2.3) while also having a low ICT (1.62). Such an occurrence, which we have attributed to Marinetti's cultural prestige in Romania, only reinforces further the idea that neither cultural novelty, nor theoretical potential guarantees a topic's "wellbeing" in the field, but a set of factors owing to a source culture's propensity toward more deeply rooted and perennial subject matters. In almost all instances where the topics display high indices of either theoretical circulation or cultural novelty, they follow the cultural proclivities specific to Romania.

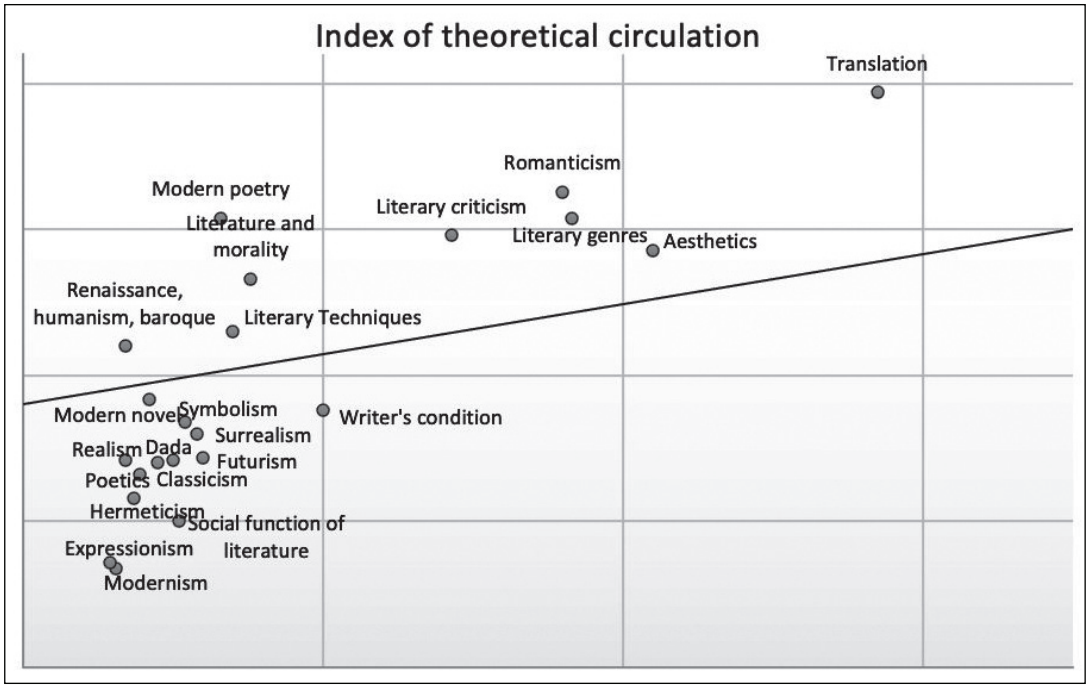


Figure 2: Distribution of topics based on the Index of Theoretical Circulation (ITC). The x-axis shows the distribution of topics, sorted from least to most prevalent (left to right), while the y-axis indicates the position of the topic relative to its ITC, with the reference line indicating productive or unproductive topics.

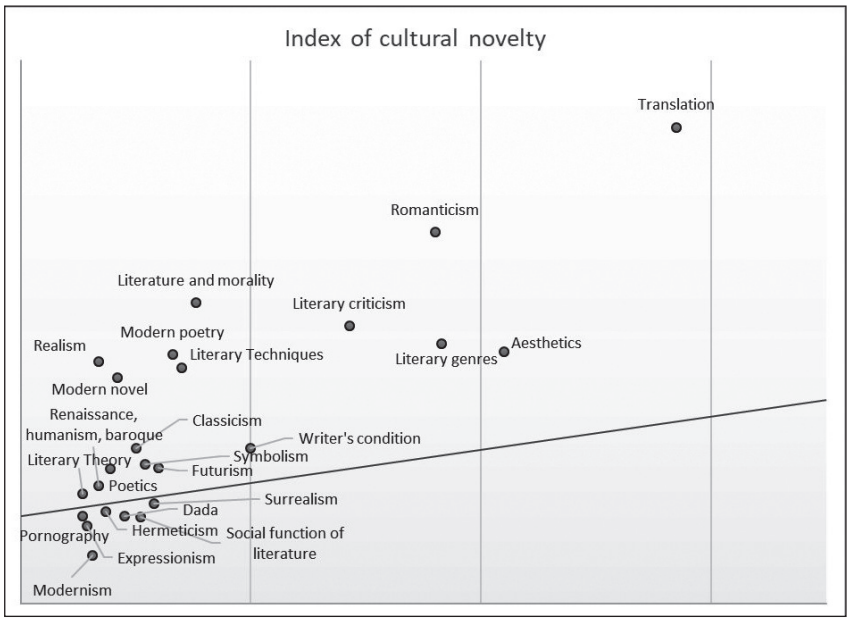


Figure 3: Distribution of topics based on the Index of Cultural Novelty (ICN). The x-axis shows the distribution of topics, sorted from least to most prevalent (left to right), while the y-axis indicates the position of the topic relative to its ICN, with the reference line indicating novel or familiar topics.

Conclusions

What we hope to have achieved in our analysis is to offer a possible explanation for the absence of a sustained production of literary theory in Romania, especially in a period and within the bounds of a region in which modern literary theory is supposedly born. If Romania as a minor and translational culture had little to no theory production in the 1920s and 1930s, it is because the self-legitimizing narratives and cultural politics of the country's leading critical figures (from N. Iorga and Garabet Ibrăileanu to E. Lovinescu and G. Călinescu) were overriding any attempts of creating critical or theoretical "systems." We believe that the theoretical regionalization that forms the basis of modern critical thought in Romania is not a symptomatic adaptation of different literary ideologies, nor is it a strategy of "cultural representation" through which Romanian literature *as* a national literature attempts to acquire a calculated position within world literature[22]. Instead, its specific evolution points toward a cultural projection undergirding a literary system that inflates and validates Western concepts in order to "invent" false naturalizations within it. Coupled with the country's dominant translational production and its role of synchronizing the national culture with the world, the production of theory in Romania served to further a nation-building program that continued well into the second half of the twentieth century.

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Notes

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4. The dataset can be freely consulted and used for additional analyses. Emanuel Modoc, "Topics in Romanian Periodicals (1919-1944) (Dataset)," *Zenodo*, https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.6471913.
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11. Ken Cherven, *Mastering Gephi Network Visualization* (Birmingham: Packt Publishing, 2015), 189.
12. Emanuel Modoc, "Traveling Avant-Gardes. The Case of Futurism in Romania," in *The Culture of Translation in Romania*, eds. Maria Sass, Ștefan Baghiu, and Vlad Pojoga (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2018), 45-61.
13. Romania was very translationally productive in the interwar period, through either novel or periodical translations. For a comprehensive account on the translation of foreign novels in interwar Romania, see Ștefan Baghiu, "Translations of Novels in the Romanian Culture during the Interwar Period and WWII (1918-1944): A Quantitative Perspective," *Metacritic Journal for Comparative Studies and Theory* 7, no. 2, 2021, 28-45, DOI: https://doi.org/10.24193/mjcst.2021.12.02.
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17. This also accounts for the interactional model of the Romanian culture when it comes to geolocating its own needs in other cultures' conceptual developments. For a detailed analysis of this phenomenon, see Alex Goldiș, "Beyond Nation Bulding: Literary History as Transnational Geolocation", in *Romanian Literature as World Literature*, Eds. Mircea Martin, Christian Moraru, Andrei Terian (New York: Bloomsbury, 2018), 95-113.
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