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Transnational Writers and Double Literary History in Communist Romania

Abstract: In this article, I examine some aspects that define transnational literature written by Romanians during the second half of the twentieth century and the conceptual crisis induced by the presence of exiled writers in a national literary system dominated by the idea that Romanian literature can only be written in Romanian. The fact that exiled writers conceived their work for a foreign audience helped them to adapt to a transnational context; without completely abandoning their Romanian roots, they adopted the values of a new culture and a new language of circulation, and achieved a cultural synthesis. By dealing mainly with literary themes inspired by their native culture or by their exile experience, they became a kind of literary double agent, disseminating the values of their original homeland and also belonging to the larger family of transnational writers. Not only the study of comparative literature might profit from the study of transnational literature, but also national literary history, especially for the period of the Cold War in Eastern Europe.

Keywords: Communism, exile literature, literary history, Romanian literature, transnational literature

After World War II, when Romania was occupied by the Soviets, Romanian writers started migrating to the West in such an impressive number that we may consider dealing with two “Romanian” literary histories: one national and one transnational. Between 1945 and 1989, a large number of literary works were published by exiled Romanian writers in various languages, such as French, English, Spanish, or German; as a result, Romanian literature is best known abroad through writers who wrote their works in foreign languages and who are considered to belong not to Romanian national literary history, but to the category of exile literature. I do not intend to deny the literary works published in Communist Romania any value, but there is a striking difference between Romania’s national and transnational literatures in terms of circulation. I will examine some aspects that define transnational literature written by Romanians during the second half of the twentieth century and the conceptual crisis induced by the presence of exiled writers in a national literary system dominated by Herder’s principles, as is the case with Romanian literature.

1 Exile literature and a transnational audience

Like many other literary histories written in countries where political independence was obtained during the nineteenth century, Romanian national literary history is built upon the idea that national literature should only be written in Romanian.¹ This explains why writers who choose other languages are not considered to have produced Romanian literature and different solutions are used to label them; generally speaking, the works of Cioran, Herta Müller,² Petru Dumitriu, or Dumitru Tsepeneag, are seen as belonging to the literature of exile, thus entering a kind of limbo, neither inside nor outside the main literary canon.

Romanian exile literature was analysed in chronological waves (Simuț 2008a; Simuț 2008b; Behring 2002). The first wave included writers who chose to remain in the West after 1945, such as Cioran, Eugène Ionesco, Vintilă Horia, or Virgil Gheorghiu. Most of them had already had a literary career in Romania when they decided to leave the country, but they adapted very well to their new cultural homelands and won important literary prizes. Some, like Vintilă Horia, wrote literary fiction in two foreign languages, French and Spanish (Horia 1967, 1987), whereas others, such as Cioran, adapted so well to the French cultural system as to be considered part of it.

The second wave of exiled writers departed from Romania in the sixties and the seventies when the political situation became unbearable because of the restrictions on individual freedom; examples include Petru Dumitriu or Dumitru Tsepeneag. They both started by having their novels translated, but eventually abandoned Romanian for French. Andrei Codrescu left Romania during the sixties, but he was only nineteen years old at that time, and he had, unlike Tsepeneag, not fought the political system. Codrescu had started writing poetry in Romanian before his departure, but he adapted to English very quickly, finding in his adopted language a true literary *Heimat*. Codrescu's Romanian roots became more visible after 1989, with his book *The Hole in the Flag* (1991), where he describes his return to his native country, and with his volume of poems which

¹ For Herder's influence on literary histories in Eastern European cultures, see Cornis Pop and Neubauer (2002, 16–17). I refer to this issue in Vranceanu-Pagliardini (2017). See also Patten (2010).

² Even before leaving Romania, Herta Müller was considered to belong to the category of German-Romanian writers, but her double belonging to Romanian and German culture is nevertheless a strong literary theme in most of her works, both before and after leaving for Germany. See, for example, the novel *The Land of Green Plums* (Müller 1996).

he wrote in Romanian before leaving the country in the Communist era (Codrescu 2005).³

The third wave of exile took place in the eighties when everybody had lost any hope that Communism might ever come to an end. If the writers who left the country during the sixties and the seventies had believed that their literary works could change the political situation and had denounced the atrocities of the Communist regime, in the eighties the dominant feeling was the lack of hope. Norman Manea, who had an impressive literary career in Romania, left the country at the age of fifty, convinced that the only way to save Romanian culture was to take it abroad. Herta Müller left for Germany in 1987, after trying in vain to resist the attacks from the *Securitate*, the Communist police; her fight with the Communist system is frequently depicted in her novels.

When we consider these examples, the main observation is that migrating to another literary system seems to be a constant feature for Romanian writers for the duration of the second half of the twentieth century (Manolescu 2003). Another aspect that comes to mind is the fact that all these writers received a lot of attention from critics and sometimes even the media. Meanwhile, these writers who left during the Cold War cannot be labelled as “exiled” any more after the fall of the Berlin Wall, but for want of a better name, their work is still considered to fall under the category of exile literature.

From a linguistic point of view, Manea’s work should be considered to be Romanian literature, as he has always written in Romanian, but *The Hooligan’s Return: A Memoir* (2013) is an auto-fictional novel dealing with the problems of belonging to multiple cultures, themes that are currently to be found in migrant and exile literature.⁴ In the end, the narrator finds his homeland only inside his native language, since neither Romania nor the United States provide enough psychological protection. Norman Manea uses the metaphor of the snail’s house in order to describe his strong relationship to Romanian as a literary language, but this metaphor also shows that he retires from the real world into a symbolic space inhabited only by words.

Dumitru Tsepeneag, who started publishing his novels simultaneously in Romanian and in French translation after 1989, continues to live in Paris, but he frequently comes to Romania and his works are starting to be reintegrated into the

3 In the preface to this volume of poems written in Romanian before leaving for the United States, entitled *Instrumentul negru: Poezii, 1965–1968* [The Black Instrument: Poems, 1965–1968] and published in 2005, Codrescu describes himself as an exiled poet.

4 See the importance of the theme of return in migrant and exiled writers in Neubauer and Török (2009). On Manea’s novel, see Polouektova (2009) in the same volume.

literary canon. His novels are published in both languages,⁵ but he prefers to be considered a Romanian writer, as he considers the label “francophone writer” to be demeaning. In his novel *Le Mot sablier*, he uses the metaphor “l’antichambre de la langue française” to describe francophone literature (Tsepeneag 1984, 12) and, after 1989, he returns to his native language with the trilogy of novels *Hotel Europa* (1997), *Pont des Arts* (1999), and *Maramures* (2001), whose titles are identical in Romanian and in French translation.

The fact that exiled writers conceived their work for a foreign audience helped them to adapt to a transnational context; without completely abandoning their Romanian roots, they adopted the values of a new culture and a new language of circulation, and achieved a cultural synthesis. There is a great difference between having a professional translation done and adapting the content of one’s fiction not only to a different linguistic code but also to a different type of society. Meanwhile, by dealing mainly with literary themes inspired by their native culture or by their exile experience, they became a kind of literary double agent, disseminating the values of their original homeland and also belonging to the larger family of transnational writers.

2 The importance of auto-translation

Writing for a transnational audience in a “big” culture and using a language of international circulation is essential. In his book *What is World Literature?*, David Damrosch (2003) considers that, by being translated into different languages and by circulating in different literary systems, texts become world literature and, although his analysis does not refer to auto-translations, as is the case with the Romanian authors I have mentioned, the situation presents similarities. When writers like Cioran, Petru Dumitriu, or Dumitru Tsepeneag chose to publish their fictions in French, they changed their style in order to adapt to a transnational audience. Nevertheless, reflection upon the change in literary language plays an essential part in their works, and it also becomes a literary theme.

Cioran’s essays are a good example, especially if we examine them from the point of view of their translation into English. The process has been described by Ilinca Zarifopol-Johnston, a comparative literature specialist who was also Cioran’s translator into English, and she notices that, in passing from Romanian to French, Cioran changed not only his style but he also transformed his thinking

5 I refer to these linguistic oscillations in Vranceanu (2012).

(Zarifopol-Johnston 2007, 22). When she started translating to English Cioran's early Romanian book, *On the Heights of Despair* (1996), Zarifopol-Johnston was continually writing to Cioran, who gave her suggestions for the English translation; in the process, she noticed that he was trying to make her change the original text by filtering it through his new stylistic perspective, by making it more synthetic and more poignant, similar to his French work. The case of Cioran is particularly interesting because he explained the difficulties of passing from Romanian to French in a famous essay published in the volume *History and Utopia*. In this essay, entitled "Letter to a Faraway Friend," and addressed to the Romanian philosopher Constantin Noica, a friend from his youth, Cioran analyses his love-hate relationship with French, explaining why he would never come back to his native language:

It would be the narrative of a nightmare, were I to give you a detailed account of the history of my relations with this borrowed idiom, with all these words so often weighed, worked over, refined, subtle to the point of non-existence, [...]. What consumption of coffee, of cigarettes, and of dictionaries merely to write a halfway decent sentence in this inapproachable language, too noble and too distinguished for my taste! I realized as much, unfortunately, only after the fact, when it was too late to change my course; otherwise, I should never have abandoned our own, whose odor of growth and corruption I occasionally regret, that mixture of sun and dung with all its nostalgic ugliness, its splendid squalor. Return to it, I cannot; the tongue I was obliged to adopt pinions and subjugates me by the very pains it has cost me. (Cioran 2015, 9)

We might add that the "pains" French had cost him also modified his way of thinking (Dollé 2004).

For Petru Dumitriu, a Romanian writer who had had an outstanding career in the Communist party in the fifties, but who decided to abandon everything in order to be able to write in freedom, the change from Romanian to French was more of a moral dilemma. After leaving the country in 1960, Dumitriu published the novel *Incognito* in French, stating that he had translated it himself. He might have wanted to underline the fact that he was still a Romanian writer, albeit in exile, but this came at a cost: the novel was considered in the competition for the literary prize awarded by the French Academy, and Dumitriu stood a great chance of winning it, but since it could only be granted to authors who wrote in French, he was ultimately excluded. Had he not mentioned the fact that the "original" text was in Romanian, he might have obtained that prestigious prize. In anger, Dumitriu burnt the only copy that he had of the Romanian version. In this case, the writer's hesitation before completely leaving the Romanian literary system behind was influenced by the political situation during the Cold War: the writers who came from communist countries kept hoping that one day they

would be able to return to their native countries and were reluctant to abandon their roots.

The crisis created by the disappearance of his Romanian words behind the French translation is treated in a different manner in Dumitru Tsepeneag's essays and literary works (Tsepeneag 2000). This writer was forced to choose exile by Ceaușescu, and for years he was stateless, living in Paris and publishing novels and essays. Back in 1975, when he thought his works written in Romanian would never be published, he decided to start writing in French. The passage from Romanian to French is described in a very original novel, the bilingual *Le Mot sablier* [The Word Hourglass], in which Romanian and French alternate, with French gradually replacing Romanian as the narrative goes on, like the air which replaces the sand in an hourglass. This metaphor describes well the way in which a transnational writer starts thinking and writing in a new language, but unfortunately the novel was published entirely in French, with the passages in Romanian translated by Alain Paruit.

These examples suggest that the choice of language not only concern the translation of words, but that writers have to adapt their texts to a different cultural code too. This is why, when the writer makes his own translation in a cultural space he gets to know through the experience of exile, his transposition is much more complex and successful than a mere linguistic translation made by a professional in the field.

3 Transnational writers as “literary double agents”

The study of migrant and exile literature is very much influenced by the use of differing terminology. Whenever we attach a label, such as “exiled,” “migrant,” or “transnational” to a writer, there is a high risk of analysing his work so that it fits a pattern. The label “transnational” may be the best choice because it spans the borders of cultures and countries without underlining the fact that a writer was forced to abandon his culture, like the label “exiled,” or the fact that he has no literary homeland, like “migrant.” At the same time, the term “transnational” emphasizes the ability to circulate by permeating boundaries between cultures, which is the main quality these literary works have. Transnational writers are similar to double agents who keep changing sides, and this becomes obvious in the case of bilingual authors who, like Tsepeneag or Vintilă Horia, change their literary language once or even twice during their career.

David Damrosch defines a literary work that has become “world literature” using “the figure of the ellipse, with the source and host cultures providing the

two foci that generate the elliptical space within which a work lives as world literature, connected to both cultures, circumscribed by neither one" (2003, 283). Starting from this definition, I would like to draw an analogy where the transnational writer is concerned. In a sense, writers coming from peripheral cultures who try to reach a larger audience imitate this path. They translate their own work into a language of international circulation and they adapt its content for a reader coming from another culture; they place themselves at the encounter of cultures, and as a result they try to increase the circulation of their fiction, even to the extent of reaching a global scale. And, if David Damrosch is right, and if "world literature is what gains in translation" (2003, 281), by switching codes and passing to French or to English without completely abandoning their Romanian roots, our exiled writers become similar to the ellipses; they have two foci, two centres that define their cultural identity.

Most transnational writers coming from Romania have a dominant literary theme, which is the representation of the Communist regime: Herta Müller, Norman Manea, and Petru Dumitriu make reference to different moments of the country's Communist history. Even Andrei Codrescu, a writer who did not experience the limitations imposed by the regime, wrote a book on the anti-Communist Revolution of 1989, *The Hole in the Flag: A Romanian Exile's Story of Return and Revolution* (1991). Norman Manea's auto-fictional novel *The Hooligan's Return: A Memoir* (2013) depicts both Communism and Fascism, showing the similarities between these systems that destroyed individual freedom. Many of Herta Müller's novels are inspired by her personal fight with the Communist political police, like, for example, *The Land of Green Plums* (1996). Representing life under Communism was, for transnational writers coming from Romania, a brand which allowed them to find their place in the literary market. This might explain why exiled writers frequently narrate their personal experience by using the form of a fictional autobiography, like Manea's *The Hooligan's Return: A Memoir*, Müller's *The Land of Green Plums*, and Dumitriu's *Incognito* (1961). At the same time, they also treat more general themes, such as the conflict between intellectuals and an oppressive political power, the difficulty of preserving one's freedom of expression, the possible ways of resisting false ideology, the trauma produced by being betrayed in a communist system by those closest to one, and how to resist psychological torture. This explains why these texts are still interesting today, not only for their documentary and historical value but also for their deeper and more general meaning.

Homi Bhabha believed, back in 1992, that transnational literature should perhaps become the main interest of comparative literature specialists:

Where the transmission of “national” traditions was once the major theme of a world literature, perhaps we can now suggest that transnational histories of migrants, the colonized, or political refugees – these border and frontier conditions – may be the terrains of World Literature. The center of such a study would neither be the “sovereignty” of national cultures, nor the “universalism” of human culture, but a focus on those “freak displacements” – such as Morrison and Gordimer display – that have been caused within cultural lives of postcolonial societies. (Bhabha 1992, 145–146)

On closer examination, not only the study of comparative literature might profit from the study of “freak displacements,” but perhaps national literary histories too, especially for the period of the Cold War in Eastern Europe. If we see transnational writers as ellipses or as (literary) double agents, then they should have a central place in the literary histories of their native countries.

In many cases, migrant writers are associated with the postcolonial world, but the case of Eastern European writers is different and it should be analysed in its own historical context. Being coerced into leaving one’s country and literary language meant for a long time that Romanian exiled writers kept looking back at their origin as if it had been forever lost. This is why changing language seemed like an unavoidable choice, and although it had advantages, like ensuring a broader circulation and a more diversified audience, it was seen as a crisis by the writers. Transnational literature written during Communism also has historical value, as it is a stimulus to think about Europe’s past: without Herta Müller’s or Norman Manea’s novels, the representation of life under Communism would be forever lost, because Communist censorship controlled all information and literary publication. By imposing on all occupied countries in Eastern Europe the literary current of “Socialist realism,” and by controlling all writers, the Soviets generated a literary brain-drain to the Western world which had, after all, very interesting results: exiled writers saved, like Aeneas, their cultural *lares* – by adapting their fictions to other cultures and by informing the Western reader about what Communism was really like.

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