

“The Import” of Literary Currents into Romanian Literature: Mimetism, Adapting, De-forming

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Résumé: *L'assimilation des courants en raison de la synchronisation et de la récupération rapide du temps perdu a abouti à l'évolution forcée de la littérature dans l'espace roumain. La question reste de savoir si le modèle culturel, une fois installé dans une nouvelle zone géographique, s'étendant sur une autre sorte de spiritualité et un héritage culturel différent, se transforme de telle manière qu'il faut le nommer et définir autrement.*

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The issue of literary currents and the way they landed on the soil of Romanian literature is old but still topical for our cultural space. The way we relate to it translates the way we relate to Western cultural models and, lastly, to ourselves. The history of our cultural life, spanning over two centuries, is interspersed with moments of failed synchronization and marked by the obsession that we are *lagging behind* and that we need to catch up. *Mimetism*, *adapting* and *de-forming* seem to us to be the successive (and inevitable to a small culture) steps the literary currents followed so as to strike roots in Romanian literature: the Western model was adapted to local realities – culture, tradition, the range of expressions – this adaptation being tantamount, of course, to the deformation of the original model.

Since these three terms have, more or less, negative connotations, an approach to the problematic of literary currents starting from such premises may seem irreverent, but for the Romanians' stand in European culture, it probably matters now more than ever to try to look realistically into our past and to understand the development of our culture without feeling offended when things do not turn out the way we would like them to. As Matei Călinescu once said (in the Preface to *European Classicism*, 1971), “unwillingly, we see the past through different eyes than our predecessors. Tradition is much more mobile than we tend sometimes to imagine. To this mobility – even unwittingly – we contribute ourselves: *we can keep only what we change.*”

The process of “importing” literary currents in Romania (on Romanian soil, respectively, given the historical epoch this phenomenon refers to) is a good illustration of what Sorin Alexandrescu called “The Romanian Paradox” (*International Journal of Romanian Studies*, 1976): to be more exact, it is about the *paradox of simultaneity*, which refers to “the integration of Romanians in time, in the European history”. Sorin Alexandrescu pointed out some elements of this paradox: we did not have a Renaissance

or a Baroque, but we had humanists and Baroque texts, “at the heart of a late mediaeval culture”; this aspect is rounded up by the coexistence of the Enlightenment, Classicism, pre-Romanticism and Romanticism, Realism, Naturalism and Symbolism toward the end of the same century. The entire history of our 20th-century literature illustrates yet another paradox, with a second Modernism in the 60s and Postmodernism under a communist regime in full swing. For Sorin Alexandrescu, the fact that “successiveness is being projected into simultaneity” bespeaks our (still present) wish to “catch up with the others”, to “make hastily what others have done in their own good time”. This assimilation of currents triggered by the intention to be synchronous and to speedily make up for the lost time led to a strained development of our literature, in which the classic-modern, classic-gothic, naive-sentimental, classic-romantic, classic-baroque, classic-mannerist dichotomies – Matei Călinescu saw them as variants of the ancient-modern opposition (see *Five Faces of Modernity*) – have never been operational. (Ultimately, with us, the single operating opposition has been the one between folkloric and cultivated literature; the clash between Traditionalism and Modernism in the interwar period was nothing else but its projection in cultivated literature).

If mimetism in the process of “importing” currents into our literature is obvious – to mention only Lovinescu’s theory on synchronism – adapting and/or de-forming should be (at least today) likewise obvious: we have now a few books, of uttermost importance to our culture, such as *The Origins of Romanian Romanticism* (Paul Cornea), *Romanian Symbolism* (Lidia Bote), *Romanian Postmodernism* (Mircea Cărtărescu), in whose titles the word “Romanian” not only indicates the place on a map, but also gives name to a species. The difference between the European currents and their Romanian homonymic correspondents can be very well described using Virgil Nemoianu’s term in relation to Romanticism: *taming* – the logical consequence of the eclecticism we are speaking about, which blurred the borders and the specificity of each and every current. The legitimacy of the term “taming” is all the more obvious since over here the literary phenomena not only gathered together various elements, but also agglutinated the contraries – as is the case of Symbolism and Parnassianism, currents having totally diverging aesthetics in their French-Belgian version – or, half a century earlier, incorporated the aesthetics of Classicism into the aesthetics of Romanticism – a fusion which became possible in Negruzzi’s novella *Alexandru Lăpuşneanul*, since then *classicised*.

In *The Taming of Romanticism*, Virgil Nemoianu traced out the three relations which East European literary historians established when speaking about “a model of Western development”: the first starts from the premise that all the East European historical and literary categories differ from the Western ones and, therefore, they should be defined in another way; the second, “the epidemic outlook”, considers that whatever is Western spreads over the East as a catching disease; and finally, the third (identifiable at Vera Călin, among others) is that in the late 18th century – early 19th century, the periods were “telescoped” to the East, in the sense that the Enlightenment gave birth to Romanticism not in a dialectical succession, but rather in “a dialectics of simultaneity, like a contemporary excrescence”. However, the three outlooks do not exclude each other;

instead they intersect, and, in a seemingly amazing way, they complete each other from a certain point onward. It is generally accepted today that a dominant civilization at a given time irradiates the adjacent cultural spaces (geographically or spiritually), playing the role of a model and guide; the dissemination is nonetheless determined by the concrete cultural contacts and not by the mere blossoming of the cultural model which would spread all over the place by its own power. (Matei Călinescu quoted, in this sense, the case of Romanian Symbolism, which flourished only in Moldova and Wallachia, while in Transylvania, which was not influenced by France and was close to the German model, the current called Sămănătorism or Pastoralism was followed, without any intermediate stages, by Expressionism.)

The question still remains whether the cultural model, once established in a new geographical space, in contact with another kind of spirituality and a different cultural heritage, undergoes sufficiently significant changes so as to warrant it being named and defined differently. Ultimately, what is the relation between Romanticism and Junimism (a Romanian literary and philosophical current from the 2nd half the 19th century), then what is the relation between Postmodernism and the generation of the 80s, to rekindle a contemporary dispute, how *symbolist* is Romanian symbolism, with its subsumed Parnassianism, with Bacovia's Expressionistic accents or Minulescu's intimate-romance notes? And, following the concept of *telescoping the periods*, is not Romanian Postmodernism, after its initial mimetic phase, a case of "the dialectics of simultaneity", being contemporary with a Modernism seemingly spreading over into the 21st century? (We shall confine ourselves to one single argument: Ana Blandiana's book, *The Tide of the Senses*, issued in 2004, unmistakably Modernist.)

What is certain is that Romanian currents are quite differently defined as compared to European currents, mainly in an attempt to appease, weaken, tame precisely the particular, individualizing elements that gave specificity to each current – the Romantic Titanism, the undefined and evasive character of symbolist texts, the cultivation of Postmodern *historiographic metafiction* (see Linda Hutcheon) – and only afterwards in the sense of absorbing elements from different aesthetics.

Adapting and de-forming should be taken as a logic consequence of the unnatural evolution of our literature: since the currents did not develop one from another or one after another, confusion often occurred between premises and goals and the outcome was quite different from the theory on which it was grounded. What is more, the objective conditions under which culture took roots in these places (see Paul Cornea, *Introduction to the Theory of Reading*) were not quite propitious, since the emergence of culture mostly depended on the readers' skills and the codes operating at that time. The non-synchronous history of our literature with the West came also upon perfectly synchronous moments, such as the theorization of Symbolism by Macedonski or the Avant-garde (we have in mind here Urmuz's first texts); nonetheless, the cultural milieu was not mature enough to capitalize on them, to cultivate them. Prematurely sprung in our literature, Symbolism and the Avant-garde had to wait for the passage of time and for Western legitimation to be able to gain credit with us as well.

Of course, a borderline needs to be set to see how currents gained ground: there are noteworthy differences between the way it took place in the 19th century and in the 20th century, in the sense that the “import” was bulky, quasi-inclusive (conceptually speaking) and with no aesthetic judgment (hence the hybridizations) in the 19th century, while in the last century this “import” belonged mainly to the initial phase of each movement, which later on generated the artistic product from within, in an inevitably specific way, closely linked to the Romanian cultural milieu – as *background* – and the social and political conditions at a given time. Explaining the process under which the currents took ground on these places by means of the three stages, i.e. *imitating, adapting and de-forming*, is perhaps the only way of lending consistency to the manner in which literary currents are taught in our country, a manner assuming two different sets of information, one about the Western artistic movement and the other about the Romanian equivalent/homonym. As they all derive from a foreign model, imitated and inevitably modified, the Romanian currents cannot be *but* different from the Western ones, bearing the mark of the spiritual space they express and the constraints of the historical events they crossed.

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