

How to write a comparative history of Romanian literature.

On the effects of the foreign gaze upon the image of a 'very' national literature

Oana Fotache

University of Bucharest

Abstract

This paper discusses the possibility of a comparative history of Romanian literature, in a regional and a European/ larger context. Starting from an analysis of the recent theoretical debates over the hybridization of comparative literature and historiography, it then investigates the presence of Romanian literature in several contemporary European literary histories or literature dictionaries. The tradition of Romanian literary historiography has seldom included a broader, transnational perspective; the purpose of this essay is to see how the foreign gaze has perceived (and constructed) the image of Romanian literature, in recent years.

Rezumat

Studiul de față discută posibilitatea unei istorii comparate a literaturii române în context regional și/sau european. Pornind de la analiza unor dezbateri teoretice recente privind împrumutul metodologic între literatura comparată și istoriografie, se documentează apoi prezența literaturii române în câteva istorii contemporane ale literaturii europene și dicționare literare. Tradiția istoriografică românească a inclus rareori o perspectivă mai largă, transnațională, asupra literaturii române; scopul acestui studiu este de a arăta cum a perceput (și construit) privirea dinafară imaginea literaturii române în ultimii ani.

OANA FOTACHE is Assistant Professor of Literary Theory at the University of Bucharest (Romania). Ph.D. in literary theory (2006). She has taught courses and published on modern literary theory, comparative literature, and exile studies. Her recent publications include: “Postcards from Europe. Representations of (Western) Europe in Romanian Travel Writings, 1960-2010”, forthcoming in M. DeCoste, D. MacDonald, R. Kilbourn (eds.), *Europe in its Own Eyes/ In the Eyes of the Other* (Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2012); “‘Global Literature’ – In Search of a Definition”, in L. Papadima, D. Damrosch, Th. D’haen (eds.), *The Canonical Debate Today. Crossing Disciplinary and Cultural Boundaries* (Rodopi, 2011); “Narrating the Communist Prison: An Interpretive Model of Some Romanian Case Studies”, in *Journal of East European Studies*, Seoul: Hankuk Univ. of Foreign Studies, December 2011; *Discourses on Method in Postwar Romanian Literary Criticism* (in Romanian; Univ. of Bucharest Press, 2009). She is currently a postdoctoral fellow of the University of Cluj.

CONTENTS

I. Theoretical Preliminaries

For several decades now, literary historiography has given up the understanding of literature as a natural reality, a *datum*, and has underlined instead the socio-political and cultural contexts that had shaped this ‘object’ and, at the same time, the historical discourse since their very beginnings. It is generally accepted that the new literary history focuses less and less on national literatures; actually this concept became very problematic during the past 20 years. The present historical approaches to literature usually conceive of it in broader contexts: for instances, the literary history of a certain region (the Balkans, Central and/or Eastern Europe, etc.), of

European, or even world literature. Contemporary theorists have emphasized the image of a global literary field (see Damrosch, 2003, Moretti, Petersson, a.o.).

The recent shift towards *Weltliteratur* and its study owes a lot to the revival of comparative literature. Obviously Goethe's view on world literature has undergone substantial reworking mainly through the removal of its Eurocentric presuppositions. This phenomenon has known an extraordinary development in the aftermath of 9/11 – an event that has revealed the profound, rhizomatic interconnectivity between different political, economical, and cultural systems around the world.

Both these disciplines – literary history and comparative literature – are facing this new object of study and are looking for new tools and methodologies to approach it. One of the main issues that literary research has come across lately is certainly the relationship between national literatures and broader literary spaces (European, world, or global literature). These latter additions to the research field are not to be seen as mere collections of national literatures. They question the very relevance of this concept (of national literature), and consequently provoke it to reinvent itself.

The traditional models and attitudes that literary history has employed are no longer valid. I am obviously referring to the totalizing view over the object, to the prevailing nationalist stakes of the literary historical discourse, to the glorification of the literary heritage in a conservative vein. The comparative principles of this discourse were more often than not oriented towards the description of the influence of a certain school or movement in different literary spaces, and pictured the literary space as a fixed planetary system where the centre was well-established and could not be displaced.

The new models that were put forward in the context of the cultural studies emergence have a political and multicultural agenda (see Hutcheon and Valdés). The canonizing objective of literary history loses its importance, in favour of the revaluation of ‘the secondary’, ‘the marginal’, or the literary periphery, whatever that may mean.

What defines most of the recent (that is, post-1989) literary histories is their programmatic relativism that avoids sweeping generalizations or predefined axiological perspectives. By exercising a distant reading (as theorized by Moretti or Perkins), by focusing on differences rather than similarities (Pettersson), the historical discourse on literature also distances itself from traditional comparativism and its legitimating strategies. This is also a sign of the methodological caveats that obsess the literary historian’s theoretical conscience.

Thus we are more likely to find thematic and generic approaches instead of strictly chronological ones. The mere figure of literary evolution that has been constitutive for literary history is no longer trustworthy; what took its place is rather a picture of the literary space that renounces any canonical privilege (Damrosch, 2008). What happens to this framework when applied to a specific case (Romanian literature under Western eyes) is the main concern of the following analysis.

II. Romanian Literature in a Nutshell. A Few Case Studies

In order to see how the foreign gaze has shaped the image of a minor literature that is also hard to locate on the European map I have chosen several recent literary histories or literature dictionaries authored by Western academics. Their stakes are transnational and comparative. They are all published after 1990, in French, English, or Italian. I have considered 3 main

categories that include chapters or entries on Romanian literature: *regional* histories (of Eastern or Central Europe), *European* literary histories or dictionaries, and *world* literature histories or dictionaries.

1. Romanian Literature in a Regional Context

Most relevant for this group is definitely Marcel Cornis-Pope and John Neubauer's *History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe* (2004-2010). An ambitious project in 4 volumes that encompasses almost 2 centuries and more than 10 literary spaces, this *History* certainly allots more space for Romanian literature than scientific works in the other 2 categories. The advantages of the 'multiple scanning' structure are clear: the same literary phenomenon is looked upon from different angles and situated in different contexts that illuminate its functioning. Thus any historical aspect of Romanian literature that falls under the scope of a certain thematic grouping can be taken into account. The foreign readers can find out details of the literary debate that opposed modernism and traditionalism in the 1920s and 30s, they can get a comprehensive account of the voices and narrative techniques employed in the Romanian novel, or on the Romanian diaspora in Paris, to name but a few points of interest. The contributors to the essays on Romanian literary culture are academics based in Romanian universities (such as Mircea Angheliescu, Monica Spiridon, Otilia Hedeşan) or exile scholars (Marcel Cornis-Pope, Călin-Andrei Mihăilescu, Letiția Guran, Florin Berindeanu). This regional literary history, innovative in structure and wide-ranging in its choice of subjects, allows for an in-depth knowledge of Romanian literature and its interconnections to the region. Obviously this kind of rhizomatic historical structure makes way for peculiarities and boundaries rather than firm canonical

positions. Its main advantages are, in my opinion, the analytical passion and the overcoming of the traditional east-west opposition in interpreting literary issues in the region. In spite of its much discussed shortcomings, Cornis-Pope and Neubauer's *History* is definitely a model of a distant but careful, comprehensive but also insightful, reading of a complex literary space.

2. *Romanian Literature in a European Context*

Very different from this accurate description (in the limits of its general model) is *Lettres Européennes. Histoire de la littérature européenne*, published under the coordination of Annick Benoit-Dusausooy and Guy Fontaine (1992, 1024 p.). On the first page one reads the following proud inscription: „Ouvrage réalisé par une équipe de cent cinquante universitaires de toute l'Europe géographique”. Yet the responsible for the articles on Romanian literature and on E. M. Cioran (the only Romanian writer to be treated separately in this work) is a certain Titus Barbulesco. The general editors have placed (rather unexpectedly) Romania in Central Europe, which is distinct from 'Europe balkanique' that contains only Serbian and Croatian literatures. The volume attempts a very large panoramic view on European literature (or on the literatures of Europe) starting from the Greek and Latin heritage up to 2000, when the debate over the European literature has been massively refueled. Although the composition of the chapters tries to consider each particular, i.e., national contribution to the development of a school/ movement/ literary technique or form, the place allocated to Romanian (or Bulgarian) literature is very limited. Usually the margins of Europe – Portugal and the Balkans – are exiled to the final phrase of a chapter. The references to major figures often miss their original points and discuss instead minor issues. For instance, Ion Luca Caragiale undergoes only a brief thematic treatment that

omits even the comical dominant of his writings: his works, we are told, display „les deux facettes de la réalité roumaine: le villageois – dont la vie et les relations sociales se conforment à la loi chrétienne d’une civilisation populaire profondément attachée à la terre (*Napasta*, 1889) – et la lutte interne d’une société qui essaie de s’européaniser en adoptant des habitudes et des idées occidentales (*De ale carnavalului, Aventures carnavalesques*, 1885)” (p. 642). I will not draw attention to the documentation errors but signal instead some misrepresentations and axiological mistakes. When discussing the evolution of the novel in the first decades of the 20th century, the only to be cited is Ionel Teodoreanu, as a dominant figure of the period with his *La Medeleni* (qualified as a ‘frescă prodigioasă’/ prodigious saga of the times, p. 770). The terminology is used inconsistently: the chapter on European postmodernism does not employ the notions of Central or Balkan Europe any more, but of Eastern Europe. For the contemporary period, we come across the notion of ‘Southern Europe’. Many important aspects of Romanian literature or canonical authors are not mentioned at all. The literatures of Portugal, Hungary, Scandinavia, or Belgium enjoy a much larger space than Romania’s.

Even though this history of European literature could have done better in many ways, at least it tries to offer a comparative, relational perspective on the various literatures of the continent. As to the insignificant place that Romanian literature occupies within it, not only the editors are to be blamed, but the lack of good translations and the consequent limited circulation in other cultural spaces.

I will not discuss here *Mémoires d’Europe. Anthologie des littératures européennes* (1993) since being an anthology, offers only an indirect perspective on the place of Romanian literature in a European context.

3. *Romanian Literature in World Literature Dictionaries and Encyclopedias*

Both Béatrice Didier, as coordinator of *Dictionnaire universel des littératures* (3 vol., 1994) and Lucio Felice & Tiziano Rossi, in *La Nuova Enciclopedia della letteratura Garzanti* (1993), cover too large a field (both historically and geographically) for the reader to expect a coherent image of Romanian literature from these works. In the French dictionary, responsible for the Romanian sector is Ecaterina Cleynen-Serghiev (a Romanian academic who became a French citizen in 1967, by marriage). A specialist in Romanian literature can gladly remark here the impressive number of separate entries dedicated to Romanian writers. When she offers an overview on the history of Romanian literature, Cleynen-Serghiev provides enough information and adequate commentary. Her comparative reference point is of course French literature. The bibliography for this sector is rather conservative but generally relevant.

What strikes us when reading the argument of *La Nuova Enciclopedia della letteratura Garzanti* is the recent inclusion of Romanian literature. This massive work of more than 1,000 pages considers it only in the 1993 edition. Obviously the space allotted to a certain writer differs according to canonical and circulation criteria. To give just an example, the entry 'Eminescu Mihail' is 3 times smaller than that reserved for the American-English writer T.S. Eliot, and 20 times smaller than for Shakespeare. Eminescu's place of birth is misspelled (Botomani instead of Botoșani). The biographical presentation shows an appetite for sensational details (such as the controversy over the cause of his death).

The section devoted to the canonical core of world literature does not discuss any Romanian work (it was quite unlikely for it to do that, anyway). Nevertheless the historical profile of

Romanian literature is accurate and comprehensive, despite small typographical errors. The most prominent personalities that stand out in this presentation (which is about the same size as that of Portuguese literature) are Mihail Sadoveanu (!), Tristan Tzara, and Eugène Ionesco/ Eugen Ionescu. Unfortunately the references are not updated and this is a (perhaps *the*) major shortcoming of this encyclopedia.

III. Concluding Remarks. The Europeanness of Romanian Literature – an Open Issue

To summarize this review of historical works I want to briefly assess the relevance of a hot issue – that of the Europeanness of Romanian literature. Its hesitation between synchronizing itself with European trends and movements and preserving its traditions is too well known (perhaps it is its very cultural mark) to be necessary to re-present it here. The image that all these literary histories and literature dictionaries construct for Romanian literature is that of an European literature, although a minor one. The canonical selection is not the same as in most Romanian literary histories, but that is perfectly acceptable. Obviously the specific features of Romanian literature are not focused upon in this comparative context that mostly values influences and exchanges between various cultural-literary spaces.

I think that an interesting opening for Romanian literature in our multicultural and global literary field would be to assume the very attractive status (under foreign eyes) of an emergent literature. I am definitely pointing out here to the recent theories of literary emergence that were put forward in our Central-Eastern European region. In addition, the postcolonial (and postcommunist, I would add) interest in redefining the concept of synchronization as

hybridization – as Homi Bhabha does – would prove also rewarding for our present view over the literary tradition.

We can only regret that Romania-based literary historians, with few exceptions, have shown little interest in contextualizing their object in such a manner, beyond the traditional study of influences. Not to mention that such images produced by ‘the foreign gaze’ are generally missing from the references of the recent ‘national’ histories of literature published in Romania.

References

Benoit-Dusauso, Annick et Guy Fontaine (eds.). *Lettres Européennes. Histoire de la littérature européenne*. De Boeck-Hachette, 1992

Cornis-Pope, Marcel and John Neubauer. *History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe*. 4 vols. John Benjamins, 2004-2010

Damrosch, David. “Toward a History of World Literature” in *New Literary History*, vol. 39, nr. 3, Summer 2008

_____. *What is World Literature?* Princeton University Press, 2003

Didier, Béatrice (ed.). *Dictionnaire universel des littératures*. 3 vols. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1994

Felice, Lucio e Tiziano Rossi, *La Nuova Enciclopedia della letteratura Garzanti*. Garzanti, 1993

Hutcheon, Linda and Mario J. Valdés (eds.). *Rethinking Literary History: a Dialogue on Theory*. Oxford, New York : Oxford University Press, 2002

Mémoires d'Europe. Anthologie des littératures européennes. Paris : Gallimard, coll. Folio, 1993

Moretti, Franco. *Graphs, Maps, Trees*. Verso, 2005

Perkins, David. *Is Literary History Possible?* Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993

Petersson, Margareta, Stefan Helgesson et al. *Literary History: Towards a Global Perspective*, 4 vols. Walter de Gruyter, 2006