

## TEACHING THE (BRITISH) EARLY MODERNITY AND ENLIGHTENMENT IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

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**ABSTRACT.** *Teaching the (British) Early Modernity and Enlightenment in the Twenty-First Century.* This paper explores the possibilities to approach the eighteenth century pedagogically in the political, ideological, and philosophical contexts of the twenty-first century. It is an admitted fact that we cannot dismiss the Enlightenment if we want to understand the contemporary contexts of our lives. We may admire or abhor the rationalism of the Enlightenment, but we cannot avoid a certain positioning with regard to the Enlightenment because philosophically, we are still in the wake of this very important trend. The Enlightenment political theory is still the inspiration of many political arrangements in the contemporary world. The notion of virtue, so dear to the Enlightenment writers and artists, has become extremely topical with the spread of AIDS and examples may continue. To put all in a nutshell, this paper is a pedagogical re-reading of the British early modernity and of the British Enlightenment in a post-Communist and post-colonial context.

**Keywords:** *education, Enlightenment, virtue, contemporary, postcolonial, post-Communist*

**REZUMAT.** *Predarea modernității britanice (timpurii) și a iluminismului în secolul al XXI-lea.* Această lucrare analizează posibilitățile de a aborda secolul al XVIII-lea din punct de vedere pedagogic în contextele politice, ideologice și filosofice ale secolului al XXI-lea. Este un fapt știut că nu putem neglija iluminismul dacă vrem să înțelegem contextele contemporane ale vieților noastre. Putem admira sau detesta raționalismul iluminismului, dar nu putem evita să luăm o anumită poziție față de iluminism deoarece din punct de vedere filosofic suntem încă în sîjalul acestui important curent. Teoria politică iluministă este încă

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inspirația multor aranjamente politice din lumea contemporană. Noțiunea de virtute, atât de dragă scriitorilor și artiștilor ilumiști a devenit atât de actuală odată cu răspândirea bolii SIDA și exemplele pot continua.

Pe scurt, acest articol este o re-lectură pedagogică a modernității britanice timpurii precum și a iluminismului britanic într-un context post-comunist și post-colonial.

*Cuvinte cheie:* educație, iluminism, virtute, contemporan, postcolonial, postcomunist

Teaching the British Enlightenment as well as early modern British literature is an extremely topical matter for me, an academic working in a Romania exhilarating over its being accepted into NATO as well as EU structures. These exterior circumstances, these alignments reassured Romania that it is allowed to belong to Europe and its (post)colonial reminiscences from when Romania was under Ottoman or Soviet domination can be laid to rest (a symbolic rest, of course). It is the moment to remember that in the nineteenth century, during the 1848 Revolutions which were also a sort of belated Enlightenments for Central and Eastern Europe, revolutionaries such as the Romanian Nicolae Bălcescu or the Hungarian Kosuth planned a unification of Europe under the label of the United States of Europe. In other words, teaching the British Enlightenment in contemporary Romania is not teaching some dusty topic that belongs to a distant past and has nothing to do with present day issues.

Firstly, I would like to emphasize the fact that there is very little material about what it means to teach British literature and culture in a different culture and civilization. It seems that some kind of egotistic self-centeredness prevents British scholars in methodology or pedagogy from realizing that the context in which you teach radically affects your methods, your objectives, and even your results. One happy exception in this scarcity of pedagogical materials dealing with our issue is a special issue of the journal *American, English and Canadian Studies* entitled "English Studies in Romania" and published in 2010. Two articles from this issue are of particular interest to us. Firstly, we can only agree with Adina Ciugureanu's conclusion to her essay "English Studies Curricula and Romanian Anthologies of English Literature" (43-58) where she emphasizes the widening of the scope of English Studies after 1990, i.e. in the political context resulting from the fall of Communism. "Since the 1990's the study of English in Romania has meant much more than merely teaching and learning British literature and language. Without neglecting the theoretical aspects of the courses offered by Romanian academics or the literary texts that have been labeled as canonical, English Studies at university

level means the study of British and American culture, the study of the culture of the English speaking communities as well as the study of British and American film and media” (56). Adriana Neagu insists upon the plurality of approaches to teaching English in the Romanian academia due to academic autonomy (an asset of the post-1990 political and intellectual climate) as well as upon the ambiguous effects of the Bologna process which unified the teaching of humanities in the European Union by lowering standards and reducing the time students spend in school. “Consequently”, says Neagu, “it can be argued that the Romanian cultures of English, old and new, are cultures of resistance and complicity at one and the same time. The collapsing over centuries of multinational existence of ‘English’ into ‘British’ and, in general, the problematic linkage and interchanging of England and Britain – a marker of England’s hegemony on the British Isles – follows post-1989 a trajectory from bookish to textualist-tourist constructions of Englishness. Mimicry and wholesale adoption thus morph into acerbic critiques of Anglocentricity in an illustration of the commodification of the subject, particularly as a result of the implementation of the Bologna process. Despite a celebratory, deconstructive phase, however, nativised varieties of English and un-English socio-cultural contexts are still not part of the indigenous pedagogy of English Studies” (75).

However, neither of these approaches deals with the transnational exchanges taking place the moment when students learn about certain literary and cultural trends that influenced Europe at large. We consider that at that moment because of the different histories of Europe a certain deterritorialization of the British Enlightenment, for instance, occurs. As British Enlightenment is taught, in Romania, in our example, in the absence or in the reduced presence of the institutions and of the ethos resulting from the persuasive cult of rationalism and of the early existence of a strong and self-assertive middle class we witness a sort of forms-without-matter acquisition process. “Forms-without-matter” is a notion coined by Titu Maiorescu, a very famous Romanian scholar and politician in the nineteenth century<sup>2</sup>. Maiorescu noticed the consequences of Romania’s rapid modernization and warned about the dangers of this evolution where institutions were replaced by mere forms, shallow imitations where the true spirit inspiring the institutions of modernity lacked<sup>3</sup>. Because of these differences in the construction of the Enlightenment and of modernity, it is important to start teaching the British Enlightenment by pointing to the commonalities between contemporary Romania and the Britain of early modernity, a period of implementation and reinforcement of democracy. In

<sup>2</sup> See Titu Maiorescu, *În contra direcției de astăzi în cultura română*, în *Opere*, 1978, p. 153

<sup>3</sup> For a very competent discussion of this problem, see Constantin Schifirneț, *Formele fără fond, un brand românesc*.

both cultures, we witness an institutionalization of democratic practices, discussions about the return of or to monarchy, and the complex issues of restitution after an interregnum. In a word, these are “interesting times” as the Chinese like to say about the troubled times characterized by unexpected upheavals and upside downs. In order to help students understand better both the commonalities and the differences between early British modernity and contemporary Romania, reception studies have to be used. Students already have certain knowledge about the history of Romanian culture from high school. It is easier to integrate this knowledge into the new knowledge about the evolution of British culture.

An interesting example in this respect is the pedagogical use of the historical interval 1640-1649 in the two cultures. In 1640 upon the command of Matei Barasarab, Voivode of Wallachia, *Pravila de la Govora*, the first collection of laws published on the Romanian territory was printed at Govora Monastery. The collection was inspired from Byzantine law which was applied to Romanian realities. In 1646 was published in Iași, Moldavia, *Pravila lui Vasile Lupu* or *Romanian Book for Teaching*. It was authored by Metropolitan Varlaam Moțoc who applied Byzantine agricultural law to the Moldavian realities. For the first time in Romanian history the voivode’s right to do justice is limited by law. On the other hand, at the other extreme of Europe, in the British Isles, a group of Puritans, members of the English Parliament dare to submit their own king to the law. They broke the medieval custom that one could only be judged by his ilk and by his superiors. These bourgeois MP’s dared to consider themselves equal with the king because they all were members of society. What was the justification of this revolutionary trial? The king had betrayed the country asking for foreign help against his own people. The unwritten contract between the leader and his people had been broken and the king had to be punished. The difference between England and Romania in juridical mentality and in the tradition of observing the law by all means is more than significant for Romanian present day realities where often law seems to be an optional choice or where laws are made not for the people but for a targeted group.

One of the earliest British writers to have been translated into Romanian was Jonathan Swift. Although *Gulliver’s Travels* had already benefited from a complete translation thanks to the 1848 militant and writer Ioan Negulici who published this translation in 1864. Still, the following variants of the Romanian *Gulliver’s Travels* were, all of them, partial, incomplete and suffering from infantilization. It seems that the Romanian readership was not interested in seeing *Gulliver* as a book for adults. Neither was there any discussion about translation Swift’s very powerful satires. Up to the versions of Vera Călin and Leon Levițchi *Gulliver* was a hero of children’s literature.

As in post-colonial literatures, the infantile got subversive nuances. The political tried to capture Gulliver. Petru Vintilă published a Swiftian short story entitled “Mr. Gulliver Pickerston în țara uriașilor” (“Mr. Gulliver Pickerston in the Country of the Giants”) in 1954, a Cold War period when the obsession against the imperialist enemy reached one of its peaks. Mr. Gulliver Pickerston is sent spying by Lord Grawery, but his villain efforts are counteracted by Ion,<sup>4</sup> the head of the *zaverгии*.<sup>5</sup> Gulliver is caught by the vigilant *zaverгии* and, frightened, he pleads his life in meek voice. Ion, nobly and politically correct, decides to send him back where he came from. Gulliver is expected to report to his Queen that the Romanian people cannot accept the yoke of capitalist West (116). Ion orders that Gulliver be put on a ship at Giurgiu, an important Romanian harbour on the Danube, but the soldiers add their own mocking punishment. They pour tar and feathers on Gulliver and only afterwards do they put him on the ship. The superiority of the Communist system is obvious.

But probably the best Romanian authored text inspired from *Gulliver's Travels* during the Cold War was written by Ion Eremia. The intertextual connections produced an allegorical satire bordering on the absurd. The author was born in 1913, he became an officer and fought in World War II both on the East and the West front.<sup>6</sup> After World War II he was promoted a general and then a deputy of the Minister for National Defence. But the pact with the Communist devil had a price. In 1956 Eremia was purged as a consequence of his critical attitude towards the new authorities. Between 1956-1958, disappointed and bitter, he wrote the fierce satire *Gulliver în țara minciunilor* (*Gulliver in the Country of the Lies*). Eremia wanted to publish his book abroad but he was reported to the secret police that he had written a book criticizing communism. He was arrested and spent long years in the Romanian Gulag. It was only after 1990 that he could get the manuscript of his book from the archives of the Secret police and publish it. It is remarkable that in his novel Eremia imagined the fall of the totalitarian regime as the consequence of the general popular revolt, exactly as it happened in 1989.

Lately, another Romanian novelist, Mircea Opriță staged another visit of Gulliver in post-communist Romania in his dystopic novel *Călătorie în Capricia*. The writer expressed his fears that the fragile democracy won with so many efforts in 1989<sup>7</sup> was endangered by nowadays politicians and he offers us a very daring satire of post-communist Romania which was published in 2011. Gulliver is shipwrecked and brought to Bucharest where he lives with an

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<sup>4</sup> Patronymic symbolic for the Romanian people.

<sup>5</sup> Security people.

<sup>6</sup> Romania fought with Germany against Russia until 1944 and then joined the Alliance and fought against Germany until 1945.

<sup>7</sup> Over 1,000 people died in Romania during the anti-Communist rallies at the end of December 1989.

ordinary family. Gulliver gets to know post-communist realities. Freedom of speech is granted but economically there is growing disparity and even injustice. He is invited by Romania's President to his residence and asked to draw all the maps that he can remember for the benefit of the President. In a scene that reminds the knowledgeable reader of Gulliver's discussion with the monarch from Brobdingnag, the Swiftian character challenges Romania's President, ironically called Trosnack<sup>8</sup>. The naïve British visitor will be severely punished. The author and his Romanian readers catch a last view of Gulliver abandoned on the last ship of the Romanian fleet, all the other ships having been surreptitiously sold by Trosnack for his own benefit. The ship turns in a whirl and loses its direction. This final image is a very adequate metaphor of the post-communist Romanian society deprived of any inspiring ideal except gross consumerism.

Making students aware of all these avatars of Swiftian reception in Romania will turn Swift's utopia from a work that cannot tell them too much because it belonged to the eighteenth century into a vibrant text that was and can be used in order to express ardent problems of the contemporaneity<sup>9</sup>.

A personal and maybe funnier example is from my own didactic experience. Teaching Swift in the 1980's in Romania became a subversive experience because of the aggressive dictatorship that dominated the country. It was fascinating that the then guardians of communist ideology did not realize what the old classic text could do in that milieu. For instance, the references to the wonderful achievements of the scientists from the Academy of Laputa could make one think of the female academician, the wife of Communist dictator, Elena Ceausescu, who had hardly taken her primary school certificate but who claimed she was a great scientist and even became member of several Academies in the world<sup>10</sup>. The efforts of the same Laputian academics to get sun rays from the cucumbers reminded one of the crazy campaigns to save energy in winter by turning off any electric bulbs but wasting electric power in inefficient industrial projects. At the same Laputian Academy the researches to get food back out of excrements reminded one of the food crisis that ravaged Romania between 1985 and 1989 and of the regime's desperate efforts to convince the population that solutions would be found.

The first Romanian translation of Jane Austen was published in the 1940's. It was *Pride and Prejudice*. The translator preferred to change the title into *The Bennet Sisters* (*Surorile Bennet*). As at that time, Romania was in alliance

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<sup>8</sup> The Romanian readers will recognize here Traian Băsescu, President of Romania between 2004 and 2014.

<sup>9</sup> For a detailed analysis of Gulliver's Romanian intertext, see "From the Infantile to the Subversive: Swift's Romanian Adventures" *The Reception of Jonathan Swift in Europe*, ed. Hermann J. Real, London: Continuum, 2005, pp. 248-272.

<sup>10</sup> These academic honours were paid with donations made by the Romanian officials.

with Germany against Britain. The garrulous Mrs. Bennet and her charming daughters marked, surreptitiously and subversively, a political attitude that could not be expressed openly at that time. On the other hand, this novel can be of great topical interest nowadays from other points of view. The fight between reason and sentiment, the victory of rationality over emotions, the necessity of virtue can find new and interesting corollaries in our century where lust and fornication have been punished with the evil of AIDS. From this perspective, eighteenth-century novels authored by women (Eliza Haywood, Charlotte Smith, Sarah Fielding, Frances Brooke) can be interesting readings which show that imposing restraint has always been a marker of a behaviour evaluated as human and humane. Hence these novels can still tell our female readers a lot about how women's lives have to answer the same questions again and again.

Equally interesting for the twentieth-century students can be the discussion of certain Romanian preferences with regard of some early modern poets. John Milton, for instance, was very high in the Romanian writers' preferences around the 1850's. Gheorghe Asachi appreciated the greatness of the Miltonic line, Ion Heliade Rădulescu inspired himself from the Miltonic epics in his efforts to give the Romanian literatures similar grand poetic stories. Milton, the politician, his rectitude and his republicanism were widely known and made known during that period when modern Romania tried to forge its own political structures and the republic was an option that some envisaged. Then after the political consolidation of modern Romania during the second half of the nineteenth century slowly but surely, Milton fell into oblivion. Tribute was paid to him strictly out of a sort of canonic obligation mimicking respect but not loving understanding. During the Communist period, the atheism of the regime led to the preferred reception and even to the metafictionalization of a secular Milton by Petre Solomon in such a way that the religious language of the seventeenth century poet became a kind of mask that was inescapable for historical reasons only. On the other hand, as the contemporary Romanian readerships lack more and more the biblical culture necessary to enjoy and truly understand the Miltonic verse, this situation has worsened. Except a handful of specialists, Milton does not seem to see too much to the contemporary Romanian readers although his plea for the freedom of the press in *Areopagitica* should continue to be topical.

John Dryden, the great seventeenth-century poet, was first translated into Romanian by Bonifaciu Bălcescu, the son of an important personality of the 1848 Romanian Revolutions, Nicolae Bălcescu. Still, as the taste of the Romanian readerships clarified under the influence of a more and more intense integration of Western modern culture, the Romanian preferences went more towards a Romantic aesthetics. Although classicism would have disciplined some more

rebellious voices than Romanticism, it slowly but surely fell into respectful oblivion and neglect. It was mentioned, it was canonized but it was no longer read. Only recently was Dryden to be translated only recently by Ioana Sasu-Bolba (in 2012). A serious gap in the Romanian reception of British poetry was partially filled but this daring gesture did not create a movement of Drydenian fans.

Last but certainly not least, an example would refer to Shakespeare although he is not exactly an early modern writer but he can also show how reception studies can help teachers and students turn Shakespeare into our contemporary. For instance, the following two lines from "Sonnet 66":

And art tongue tied by authority  
And folly doctor-like controlling skill

were seen, during the 1980's, as a good representation of Elena Ceausescu, the famous lady of Romanian communism about whose intellectual achievements we have already talked above. The overwhelming censorship of those times was metaphorically represented by the line: "And art tongue tied by authority". The "folly doctor-like" was certainly the Communist dictator's wife and the controlled "skill" was certainly us, the people. A great classic, such as Shakespeare, can never be obsolete. His understanding of the world and society can be prophetic.

Another example can be relevant for the contemporaneity of the Enlightenment or early modern literature. Exactly as attractions, likings can tell us something about the *forma mentis* of a culture where early modernity and/or the Enlightenment took a certain shape and not another, so can rejections, apprehensions, reluctance with a text be equally revealing.

My example refers to the widely acclaimed novel *Tristram Shandy* by Laurence Sterne. The first Romanian translation was published in the 1960's in a climate of relative liberalization and in an age when postmodernism started to manifest itself in Romanian culture itself. During the previous centuries, the Romanians did not pay too much attention to this work because it did not tell them too much about themselves. Consequently, they were not able to understand this masterpiece. Preference was given to the so-called texts of the day or to popular literature, entertainment readings that would support the Romanian view about the exoticism of British culture, which was both dominant, imperialistic and had had privileged contacts with otherness by its sailors.

In conclusion, we can say that the integration of reception studies into the teaching of (British) early modernity and Enlightenment reduces the defamiliarization that an encounter with a foreign literature entails. It can help the student integrate the new cultural and literary information into a system of

literary knowledge that he already has. This leads to a perspective on world literatures shaped according to the channels of communication and interstices of common sets of values that lead to another perspective on globalism: the power of literatures and cultures of expansion (such as the British one) is counterbalanced by the reactions of the cultures of endurance (such as the Romanian one). Their attractions as well their rejections are not irrelevant. Globalization becomes a dynamic concept, with its specific give-and-take rule.

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