

PERIPHERAL INTERACTIONS IN MIHAI IOVĂNEL'S *HISTORY OF CONTEMPORARY ROMANIAN LITERATURE:* 1990-2020

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ABSTRACT. *Peripheral Interaction in Mihai Iovănel's History of Contemporary Romanian Literature. 1990–2020.* The overall purpose of this contribution is to assess the impact the use of examples from “marginal” literatures has on the transnational mapping of contemporary Romanian literature undertaken by Mihai Iovănel in his recent *History of Contemporary Romanian Literature: 1990-2020*. Thus, the article aims to discuss the interconnections between contemporary Romanian literature and other peripheral literatures in the *History*. The author uses, Mîrț argues, the Western canon strategically to show how local literary production has been incorporated into the global literary circuit. Starting from the polysystem theory of Even-Zohar (1990), the article discusses the relationship between *static* and *dynamic* canonicity. The paper notes that in Iovănel's project, the *center-periphery* and *canonical-non-canonical* dichotomies are complicated by the use of examples from other marginal spaces and, respectively, by the integration of paraliteratures in discourse. In terms of patterns or external influences, the Western canon's presence in contemporary Romanian literature supplemented by literary and cultural material from Central and East European literature. In mapping local literary production, Iovănel takes into account Bessarabian literature as well.

Keywords: *Central and Eastern European literature, Bessarabian literature, Western canon, dynamic canon, transnational*

REZUMAT. *Interacțiuni periferice în Istoria literaturii române contemporane: 1990-2020 de Mihai Iovănel.* Articolul își propune să discute (inter)conexiunile dintre literatura română și alte literaturi periferice în *Istoria literaturii române*

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contemporane. 1990-2020 de Mihai Iovănel. Autorul recurge la canonul occidental în mod strategic, pentru integrarea producției literare locale în circuitul literar global, iar pornind de la teoria polisistemului (Even-Zohar), articolul discută raportul dintre canonicitatea *statică* și *dinamică*. În proiectul lui Iovănel, dihotomiile centru-periferie, canonic-non-canonic sunt depășite prin recursul la exemple din alte spații marginale și, respectiv, prin integrarea paraliteraturilor. Dacă în ceea ce privește modelul sau influențele externe, canonul occidental este completat cu referințe din literatura central și est-europeană, în cartografierea producției locale, Iovănel integrează și literatura basarabeană. Scopul articolului este să interogheze dacă recursul la alte literaturi marginale, adică la un canon global dinamic, poate avea efecte în cartografierea transnațională a literaturii române contemporane.

Cuvinte-cheie: *literatura central și est-europeană, literatură din Basarabia, canon occidental, canon dinamic, transnațional*

A contemporary literary history raises a number of issues regarding the relationship between a national and a global canon, the negotiations between imported and exported literary forms and, last but not least, the questioning of methodology. Mihai Iovănel's *The History of Contemporary Romanian Literature. 1990-2020* seems, at first sight, to oppose the new trends in Western literary historiography, which focus more on distant-reading and digital approaches.² However, in Iovănel's project, national limitations are constantly questioned, most of the literary phenomena discussed being related to the Western canon. According to Cosmin Borza,

Iovănel constantly builds the cultural profile of contemporary Romanian literature through the global network in which he tries and sometimes manages to integrate himself, respectively by showing that, starting with the 2000 generation, Romanian writers have defined themselves mainly in relation to external models, invalidating any the possibility of reinvigorating inertial-organicism historiographical approaches, legitimized by the closed circuit of intra-national comparisons.³

² For further reading see Bode (2018, 17-36).

³ Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own. The original Romanian reads: “[Mihai Iovănel] construiește constant profilul cultural al literaturii române contemporane prin intermediul rețelei globale în care încearcă și, câteodată, reușește să se integreze, respectiv prin constatarea faptului că, începând cu generația 2000, scriitori locali se definesc preponderent în relație cu modele externe, invalidând orice posibilitate de revigorare a demersurilor istoriografice inerțial-organiciste, legitimate prin circuitul închis al comparațiilor intra-naționale” (Borza 2021, 124).

This approach is also a polemical reaction to the way leading twentieth-century literary historians, such as George Călinescu and Eugen Lovinescu, relate to foreign literatures. As Alex Goldiș points out, “twentieth-century Romanian and East-European literary historiography more largely have remained markedly indebted to the nineteenth-century Herderian imperative that rendered the genre a ‘reflection’ of, and thus an argument for, the ‘national soul’” (2018, 98). For example, Călinescu practiced a “policy of minimizing and, sometimes, even negating external influences on modern Romanian literature” (Terian 2009, 290), in a performative discourse, which built a compensatory narrative to the inferiority complexes of Romanian literature. In this sense, Iovănel’s *History...* aims not to justify and legitimize contemporary literature on the map of world literature from a central-nationalist perspective, but to question the relations between center and margin, systems, and emerging institutions that have influenced the literature of the last three decades.

However, the Western canon to which Iovănel appeals is not a “stable” unity. The idea of the external canon, which interacts with Romanian literature, can be discussed from the perspective of the polysystem. Even-Zohar defines a polysystem as “the network of relations that is hypothesized to obtain between a number of activities called ‘literary’, and consequently these activities themselves observed via that network” (1990, 28). In Iovănel’s *History...*, the external canon is constituted by the relation with other factors from the polysystem of the literary field, such as the institutions, the market, the translation policies, the consumers (readers), etc. In this sense, one cannot speak of a *static* canonicity, but of a *dynamic* one. Even-Zohar identifies the former as occurring when “a certain text is accepted as a finalized product and inserted into a set of sanctified texts literature (culture) wants to preserve” (19), while what “may be called dynamic canonicity” refers to “a certain literary model manag[ing] to establish itself as a productive principle in the system through the latter’s repertoire” (19). As Christian Moraru points out, this “is a tome for postcommunist and post-postmodern times—once again, a work on literary and historical transformation and also itself transformative in the sense that, to put it plainly, doing Romanian literary history in the wake of Iovănel’s *History* cannot be what it had been before it” (Moraru 2021, 2). It becomes clear that such a book could not be more receptive to the symptoms of literary theory and historiography specific to post-communism and post-postmodernism. One of these is the democratization of the canon. Therefore, the following section will highlight the external literary references used by Mihai Iovănel and the role they have in discussing the “transnational specificity” of Romanian contemporary literature. On the one hand, external references that serve as points of comparison include examples from other peripheral areas, such as Central and Eastern European literature.

On the other hand, Bessarabian literature is also integrated in the discussion about “global connectivity,” but from a transnational perspective. The use of other peripheral literatures as terms of comparison for local production poses questions about the possibilities of interaction between them.

The (Im)Possibility of a Central and East European Literary Network

Discussing the relation of Romanian literature to Western models, Iovănel points out that “for Romanians, whose general culture framework is predicated on predominantly Western references, the lack of reciprocity of the West regarding the knowledge of Romania is still a sensible subject.”⁴ He shows the absurdity of this attitude, because the Romanian culture “suddenly ignores the cultures of neighboring countries such as Bulgaria, Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, etc.”⁵ In fact, Iovănel highlights the lack of interactions and connections between the literatures in the Central and Eastern European literary field. In the introduction to *History of the literary cultures of East-Central Europe. Junctures and Disjunctures in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, the editors defined a need “for reconsidering literary history from a regional angle” because “[i]n East-Central Europe, a region poised at the crossroads of its history, not only literature, but the political culture itself will benefit from a rethinking that emphasizes transnational interactions” (Cornis-Pope and Neubauer 2004, 2). The question is whether such crossroads and intersections from this geocultural space can also be problematized in a history of contemporary Romanian literature aimed at a local readership.

In the Romanian cultural field, the discussion about Central Europe gained ground around the 2000s, with projects such as The Third Europe Group [A treia Europă], which popularized (through publications and other cultural projects) Central European literature and culture.⁶ They resumed, to a certain extent, the famous discussions on this topic from the 80s, when Milan Kundera, Czesław Miłosz and others had begun to speak about the separation of Eastern Europe from Western Europe, accusing the West of leaving “Central Europe” (largely the territories that had been part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire) under the rule of communism. The Timișoara-based group brought these debates back into discussion, in order to recover the discourses (from the West) to

⁴ “[P]entru români, ai căror parametri de cultură generală presupun preponderent referințe occidentale, lipsa de reciprocitate a Vestului în ce privește cunoașterea României a rămas un subiect lezant” (Iovănel 2021, 647).

⁵ “[cultura română] ignoră senin culturile unor țări vecine ca Bulgaria, Serbia, Croația, Slovenia, Ungaria, Cehia, Slovacia etc.” (Iovănel 2021, 647).

⁶ For further reading see Ungureanu (2002).

which the Romanian culture had not had access before the fall of communism. These attempts represented a strategy for the integration of Romanian literature within a “global connectivity” network, which occurred after the fall of communism. But, as Iovănel notes in his volume,

cultural integration is as difficult as socio-political integration. The number of discussions after 1989 on the “Europeanness of Romanian literature” reveals a complex related to the obsession of not being perceived “only” as Balkan (or not European enough), but also a disinterest in too “peripheral” cultures, such as those of Hungary or Bulgaria. The imperative to transfer this obsession into a real form is one of the invariables that cross the entire post-communist cultural field, from primitive nationalists to the pro-European intellectual elite.⁷

Despite the attempts to integrate Romanian literature in this circuit, there is no real regional interconnectivity, visible in current cultural policies. A telling example is the translation market: after 1989, Romanian publishing houses have oriented themselves after the patterns of Anglo-Saxon or French literary production, without paying attention to neighboring literatures. The effect is that the most important point of reference in the Romanian literary field remains the Western canon. In his project, Iovănel implicitly shows how policies to promote a possible (inter)connection between Central European and Romanian literature are, in fact, dysfunctional. A transnational map of Central and Eastern European literature cannot be drawn. There are no significant cultural dynamics or direct exchanges. However, the “global” canon used by Iovănel as a reference point is not “purely” Western. There are references to Central and Eastern European literature, albeit without being integrated in a homogeneous geocultural structure. Due to the reference to writers from other peripheral spaces, the external canon in *The History of Contemporary Romanian Literature* is a *dynamic* one.

As Cosmin Borza points out, the reference to an external (Western) canon is one of the strategies that Iovănel uses to legitimize certain paraliterary genres in the discussion about the evolution of the Romanian literary field in the last three decades (Borza 2021, 124). Among the writers representing the

⁷ “integrarea culturală este însă un proces la fel de dificil precum integrarea sociopolitică. Cantitatea discuțiilor de după 1989 privind ‘europenitatea literaturii române’ trădează un complex legat de obsesia de a nu fi percepuți ‘doar’ ca balcanici (sau nu suficient de europeni), dar și dezinteresul pentru vecinii prea ‘periferici’, de felul Ungariei sau Bulgariei. Imperativul transferării acestei obsesii într-o formă reală reprezintă una dintre invariabilele care traversează întregul câmp cultural postcomunist, de la naționaliștii primitivi până la elita intelectuală pro-europeană” (Iovănel 2021, 649-650).

Central and Eastern European space the most frequently mentioned is Stanisław Lem. However, he is a point of reference for his position in the field of world literature and not as a representative of Polish literature, in particular, or of Central European Literature, in general. His name is evoked when Iovănel defines the “points of resistance” of the Romanian post-communist literary field, which “aim to identify precisely the nexuses of such systemic difficulties that both communist and post-communist writers go through, even as they have to negotiate the poetic influence of their predecessors.”⁸ Iovănel quotes Lem’s 1981 essay “Metafansia: The Possibilities of Science Fiction,” in which the argument is that systems of restraint are important conditionings for a writer. Otherwise, when there are no conditioning points, there is a crisis of creativity. Without necessarily being invoked as a theoretical authority, but rather as “source of inspiration,” Lem’s name is relevant in the discussion about the transition from resistance points in communism to post-communism (the Polish writer being representative of both periods).

In another section of the book, Petru Cimpoeșu’s intertextual strategies are compared to those of Lem, who “uses the conventions of the detective novel to problematize and overcome them” (Iovănel 2021, 383). Then, Lem is named among the classics of SF literature, Iovănel outlining some Romanian writers who are inspired by the writings of the Polish author. Obviously, Lem, as a classic author of SF literature, is mentioned as part of a global, *de*-nationalized canon. This proves that the influence system is not dichotomous, from Central Europe to the Romanian literary field and vice versa but mediated by a third factor: reception on the Western market. The global circuit involves the entry of an author from the periphery first on the global (Western) stage and then back into a peripheral culture, at a considerable temporal distance. This may cause the annulment of “national specificity” to the detriment of the so-called “universality” of *world literature*.

Another example is Mircea Cărtărescu’s position on the transnational literary map. He is mentioned among other important names from Central and Eastern Europe: “In addition to Pamuk, authors such as the Czech Jáchym Topol (*Sestra*, 1994), the Polish Olga Tokarczuk, the Serbian David Albahari (*Leeches*, 2005) and others are part of the transnational *hub* of which Cărtărescu is a part of.”⁹ This is not about a possible regional transnational network that produces

⁸ “urmărește să identifice tocmai nexurile unor astfel de dificultăți sistemice prin care trec atât scriitorii formați în comunism, cât și cei formați în postcomunism, dar care au de negociat influența în materie de poetică a predecesorilor” (Iovănel 2021, 273).

⁹ “În hub-ul transnațional din care Cărtărescu este o piesă mai fac parte, în afară de Pamuk, autori precum cehul Jáchym Topol (*Sestra*, 1994), poloneza Olga Tokarczuk, sârbul David Albahari (*Leeches*, 2005) ș. a.” (Iovănel 2021, 675).

direct reciprocal influences, especially since some of the writers mentioned are not even translated into Romanian, so there was no reception in the local field of literature. The fact that they come from the same geographical area is merely a coincidence. What all authors have in common is the fact that they represent minor literatures. Similar strategies can also be identified in their literary evolution, which allowed them to be integrated in and to assert themselves on the global literary market. As for their writings, they can be framed within the postmodernist paradigm, without direct interactions and influences connecting these authors. The literary systems from which these writers come can only interact indirectly, through an intermediate factor: the Western market. This proves the lack of a direct interconnection between Romanian literature and Central and Eastern European literatures. In this sense, the Western canon used by Iovănel to explain Cărtărescu's position in this network is a dynamic one: authors from peripheral literatures supplement references and writers from the Anglo-Saxon space, provided that they are already integrated in the international circuit of literature.

It is telling that references to Central and Eastern European writers can be subsumed into two categories: SF or postmodern literature. On the one hand, this shows that these two literary forms are the most frequently exported and well received in world literature. On the other hand, it can be assumed that the writers from this geocultural space opt for the same strategies in constructing their position on the global stage.

The Intra-National Circuit: Bessarabian Literature in Iovănel's *History*

Iovănel discusses the case of Bessarabian literature in the section about "global connectivity" from the chapter on "transnational specificity." However, this is not seen from an "ethnocentric" perspective, but as a nodal point at the confluence of several literatures:

To these forms of import, can be added those focused on Bessarabia, the main territory outside Romania where the Romanian language is spoken. A relevant and complex example from a geostrategic point of view is Emilian Galaicu-Păun's work, situated at the intersection of several political, cultural and linguistic intertextualities: Romanian peripheral literature, French central literature and Soviet / Russian literature.¹⁰

¹⁰ "Acestor forme de import-recuperator le pot fi adăugate cele având ca obiect Basarabia, principalul teritoriu din afara României unde se folosește limba română. Un exemplu relevant și complex din punct de vedere geostrategic este acela al literaturii lui Emilian Galaicu-Păun, aflată la intersecția mai multor intertextualități politice, culturale și lingvistice: literatura periferică română, literatura centrală franceză și literatura sovietică/rusă" (Iovănel 2021, 655).

The mention of Emilian Galaicu-Păun is relevant for presenting the specificity of Bessarabian literature. This writer is discussed both for his metafictional prose and for his poetry, framed in the “nineties generation,” but specific for its hermeticism and intertextuality. As in Cărtărescu’s case, the literary techniques of Emilian Galaicu-Păun can be subsumed to postmodernism. In his case, the intertextual filter is also “global” (656), the positive reception is due to the way he operates with various intertexts, from Apollinaire to Ilarie Voronca or Paul Celan. Therefore, it is significant that the reception of a Bessarabian poet is also mediated by a “Western canon,” recognizable in his text. His use of intertextuality suggests that the Romanian literary field, like the global one, is more open to importing postmodern literary forms. At the same time, the literary strategies that a writer from Bessarabia can use to gain a favorable position in the literary circuit (Romanian and then, global) are also suggested.

The discussion of Bessarabian literature shows that the contemporary literary “canon” is a *dynamic* one, open especially to recoveries, as in the case of diasporic literatures. Bringing this literature into discussion is a pretext to notice the current relations between Romanian and Bessarabian literature. How does the latter relate to Romanian literature? Is Romanian literary field still a point of reference and mediation to the global literary scene (as it happens, for example, in the case of Tatiana Tîbuleac’s literature)? Iovănel’s project does not offer a broader perspective on the literature of this region (apart from Emilian Galaicu-Păun, only a few mentions appear). This is largely due to the lack of a regional network and a stronger interaction between Romanian and Bessarabian literature. As in the case of other peripheral literatures, the Romanian literary field is rather ignorant about the literature across the Prut (proof that too few works of literary history have discussed it so far and, up to Iovănel, not through a “transnational” perspective). Thus, the way Bessarabian literature is dealt with in *The History of Contemporary Romanian Literature. 1990-2020* shows that cultural and literary interconnections between the two Romanian and Bessarabian literary fields tend to be accidental. Although both literatures are written in the same language and they have a peripheral position, there is no real systematic dialogue between literary directions, formulas, models, etc. The intra-national connection established between the two spaces is possible, therefore, through postmodern formulas and constant negotiations of positions in the literary field.

While external references have a strategic role in legitimizing the discourse on certain movements, directions, and literary genres in the Romanian literary field, the idea of the canon itself, it bears pointing out in closing, becomes problematic for Mihai Iovănel’s *The History of Contemporary Romanian Literature 1990-2020*. The integration of heterogeneous references from the East-Central

European space and the discussion of Bessarabian literature from a transnational perspective show the methodological change operated by the author. On the one hand, the openness to a democratic external canon also implicitly shows the status of peripheral literatures: without direct (inter) connections or relationships, the dialogue between them is mediated by the global market. On the other hand, in order to reach a “transnational specificity” of Romanian literature, a dynamic external canon generates in turn a *dynamic local canon*, and only through this dynamism can “global connectivity” be created with other (central or peripheral) cultures.

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