

Bulgarian Literature Mirrored in Romanian Culture

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Abstract: *A researcher studying Balkan culture will soon discover that, no matter how many common aspects may be discovered if comparing different cultures of the region; it is obvious that they ignore each other. Little is known in Romania about Bulgaria, Serbian or Albanian literature apart of international/globalised names such as Julia Kristeva, Orhan Pamuk or Ismail Kadare. The paper is based on a case study-Bulgarian literature and justifies the necessity to investigate the connection between two culture which are both the result of melting three strata (Byzantine, Turkish, folklore), sheering the deep influence of French culture in the 19th century and that of Anglo-American culture in late 20, early 21st. A brief historical view justifies the main research question: How Bulgarian literature is mirrored in Romanian culture. Possible answers to the question may lead to a model of understanding side cultures, the analysis revealing the importance of modern communication and postmodern understanding for so called "minor" cultures as Romanian and Bulgarian ones.*

Key words: *Balkan literature, cultural understanding, cultural model, Bulgarian*

LEAD IN

Part of a huge territory for almost 1000 years, the contemporary countries of the Balkan Peninsula, were struggling in the 19th century to develop their national profile and shaping the identity of their national culture, and at the same time they made great efforts to establish the profile of their national languages. The old traditions and the Greek influence of the early 18th. century are rejected, as well as Greek as a common language in Balkan culture; They start to fight for westernization of all components of social, politic and cultural life. The leading models are French in poetry, novel or fine arts. Ignored for almost 100 years the Balkan tradition is rediscovered (at least in Romania) in the '20 as a way of offering an original touch to modern imported shapes and a specificity to a literature which was often accused to be just a sort of imitation of western models. Rediscovering the Balkan tradition has not leaded, as a consequence to a better understanding of other literatures or cultures of the region.

Even today in a globalised society those countries are ignoring each other. Little is known about most important Bulgarian, Albanian, Serbian writers. Some Romanian writers have roots in other Balkan countries¹, but they are representatives of Romanian literature². Despite the fact that there is Bulgarian church and a Bulgarian high school in Bucharest or that some of important representatives of Bulgarian literature like Sofronie Vracimseki (1739—1813), Petăr Beron (1785—1871) or the revolutionary poet Hristo Botev (1848—1876), lived in Bucharest, there is not a real communication between the two cultures. As many of the scholars from both countries have pointed, the great difference between the languages may be considered as a natural barrier in communication. In my opinion it is more than that. Writers who are quite popular as: Julia Kristev, Tzvetan Todorov or Ismail Kadare reached the attention of Romanian cultural milieu because they were introduced through French path. The effort of assimilating western model made each culture to ignore its neighbours who were considered to oriental.

The paper is based on a case study-Bulgarian literature and justifies the necessity to investigate the connection between two cultures, which are both the result of melting three strata (Byzantine, Turkish, folklore), sheering the deep influence of French culture in the 19th. century and that of Anglo-American culture in late 20, early 21st. The case of Bulgarian literature is probably similar to that of any other Balkan ones³, which have difficulties in being promoted in Romania because in that country cultural milieus are not interested in promoting neighbourhood cultures and due to the language⁴, at the same time the choice being justified by the context of the presentation and by the fact that recently a well known Bulgarian writer, Gheorghe Gospodinov was invited as a guest of honour at an International Festival in Bucharest⁵. Some literary websites seems to be

interested in Bulgarian literature as well as in promoting "strange" literatures from remote and unknown regions.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

As many other cases, studying the way in which Bulgarian literature is mirrored in Romanian culture research brings us to decoding of a complex issue and extend both theoretical and practical understanding of a complex issue to things that have been noticed as very important by previous researches. Unlike those who consider that a case study is an empirical research which leads to no ground for establishing a reliability or generality of findings, I agree with those who consider that a case study is a necessary step in any research and it may help in building a model or understanding [9]. Research may bring into light unexpected aspects and answers to different research questions, therefore an important contribution to a delicate problem.

The main research question tries to discover and to analyse how Bulgarian literature is mirrored in Romanian culture, mainly in postmodern age, without neglecting the historical background where some causes of the present aspects may have their roots. This question determines another one: Why Bulgarian culture, literature in particular is still ignored by a large number of both ordinary readers and critics. If this question may be answered, then it will be clear if the language is the most important obstacle or not.

SHORT HISTORICAL VIEW

In the 19th century the cultural life in the Balkans is characterised by a strong French influence and a turn over western culture, aspects which in some cases led to imitation and a kind of culture which may be considered colonial [4]. After the First World War, when national fights seemed to reach an agreement, Romanian scholars turned to old Balkan/Byzantine tradition. One of the most important was Nicolae Iorga who, in 1935 wrote an important book *Byzance après Byzance (Byzantium after Byzantium)*, referring to the imperial influence on the political, social, cultural, and intellectual development of the medieval Europe and the impact of the fall of Byzantine Empire on European civilization. He underlines the legacy and the continuation of Byzantium institutions and culture, mainly in Romania, mentioning other Balkan countries too. Previously to this important work organized conferences on the subject at Sorbonne⁶, in order to change the stereotypical vision of western Europe concerning the Balkans.

In 1942 an important literary magazine *Gandirea*⁷ dedicated one of its issues to the Balkans. The mentioned magazine has a poetical name, Balkan Voices [3]. In his article the editor speaks about the connections between Bulgaria and Romania, underlining the fact that both countries have a similar cultural background, but they let the differences to separate them. The so called "great cultures" such as the French, the English or the Russian ones are to be blamed for the never ending fight between the Balkan countries. In his opinion Romania and Bulgaria are deeply connected by the orthodox religion and this link refers not only to scholars but the whole people "What created by centuries deep affinity between the Romanian soul and that of the Bulgarians is the religious idea, embodied by the Orthodox Church"[1] In his opinion this connection is so strong because: "Both in Romania and Bulgaria, the Church rooted in the hearts of Christian people and it created a similar mentality and spiritual consciousness. In popular structures this feeling in the sense of Christian brotherhood brings us together and is much stronger than the race that differentiates us"⁸ [2]. In the same volume a similar opinion is expressed by a Bulgarian scholar Simeon Simeonov in the article *Bulgarian Orthodox spirituality*. He considers that the Orthodox Church allows national communities to develop freely, there for is a perfect common frame for both Bulgarians and Romanians and at the same time it gives the glamour of the imperial Byzantine culture [8].

The importance of the articles published by *Gandirea* is underlined by the fact that a contemporary Romanian critic, Valeriu Raeanu published in 2009 an article with the

same title, actually a commentary with a postmodern perspective of the opinions expressed in 1942 [7]. He agrees that the two cultures have in common the orthodox religion and that the differences in language build a gap between them. There are many other opinions expressed during the last century, but the analysis insisted on the articles published by Gandirea because they echoed in postmodernity. Between the two wars there were some literary publications which constantly showed their interest for Balkan literature in general, it should be mentioned *Gazeta de Transilvania*, *Noua Revistă Română*, *Convorbiri literare* or *Universul literar* [5] (literary supplement of the post popular newspaper of the epoch).

On the other shore of the Danube, Maria Todorova mentioned that Bai Ganiu, a representative character for the realistic Bulgarian literature has much in common with Caragiale's hero Mitica. They are both representative for Balkan atmosphere, with almost the same way of speaking and irony versus society [6]. The novel was translated in Romania, published in a magazine in different issues, but unfortunately quickly forgotten. In a short overview on Balkan literature Mircea Muthu notices that many comparative studies can be done by investigating both literatures prose or poetry, but nobody seemed to be interested in that research field. He mentions that there are around 130 Bulgarian writers translated in Romanian during the last hundred years, some of them in large anthologies of prose or poetry, others in separate volumes. Mircea Muthu quotes author like, Aleko Konstantinov, Ivan Vazov, Iordan Iovkov, Liuben Karavelov (who lived in Bucharest for several years) or modern writers like Emilian Stanev, Vera Mutačeva or Elisaveta Bagreana. Comparing prose and poetry he concludes that there are more translations of prose than poetry [7]. Even if the translated titles are representative their real echo in Romanian culture is minor.

POSTMODERNITY – A NEW ATTITUDE?

Postmodernism as well as post modernity are common words today. As a literary term, postmodernism started to be used by the Anglo-American world around 1950. Then Jean-François Lyotard made it famous in his book *The Postmodern Condition*. But under the iron curtain postmodernism was just a whispered word, mark of western decadence, untouched dream. Soon after '90 it has become fashionable yet with different impact in each country. The first real postmodern Bulgarian writer coming to Romania is Gheorghe Gospodinov.

Guest of honour at International Festival of Literature – Bucharest 2011, among other guest from Europe⁹, Gospodinov, read from his novel *A natural Novel*, recently translated in Romanian, by Catalina Puiu for Cartier Publishing House (a publishing house from Chisinau Republic of Moldavia). Listening to his reading the Romanian readers were impressed by the innovative conception of the Bulgarian writer and by way in which he manages to work with both realistic and magic/fantastic plans of the developed action. The novel was translated in many languages, has become quite famous among European experts, before reaching the attention of Moldavian editors and Romanian organizers of the festival. Even from those fragments similarities with some Romanian post modern writer were obvious. Same way of writing using the pattern of oriental/Balkan story with stories starting one in the previous and melting in a huge story, western type defragmentation and an irony covered in a deep/historical sadness. All those elements of writing can be found in his novel and in Romanian postmodern prose and are arguments for defining the frame of Balkan literature. Nevertheless, despite Gospodinov real success, Bulgarian literature remains unknown for a large part of Romanian public.

Recently Romanian Cultural Institute initiated a programme **Translation and Publication Support Programme (TPS)** a programme meant to support Romanian literature abroad. Visiting the programme site I was pleased to see that in since 2006, 31 Romanian writers were translated in Bulgarian from 337 translated books. The dramatist Matei Visniec's was translated in Bulgarian and due to this effort two volumes were offered

to Bulgarian readers. One is *Anthology of Theatre* (original title *Antologie de teatru*) in 2012, translated in Bulgarian by Lora Nenkovska și Ivan Radev¹⁰ and published by Panorama+plus in 2012, the second one *Man with a single ail* (original title: *Omul cu o singură aripă*), translated by Rumyana Stancheva and Vasilka Aleksova, published in 2011, following the translations made in 2007 and 2009¹¹. One of the most important Romanian modern poets, Lucian Blaga was translated by Ognean Stamboliev for Avangard Print¹². The same translator offered to Bulgarian public, at the same publishing house, a book written by Mircea Eliade¹³ who happens to be a specialist in Balkan culture too. Mircea Cartarescu's novel *Nostalgia*¹⁴ was translated in 2007.

In 2008 a step forward was made by the publication of *Contemporary Romanian Poetry, Prose, Culture*, Balkani 93 LTD, (Literary Balkans Magazine), a publication supported by ICR –Romania and Bulgarian publishing house. Reading its title and taking into consideration that some of the translated books were published by the same institution it is obvious that Bulgarian writers as well as Romanian ones are aware of the importance of their common Balkan background. In Romania a cultural magazine like *Carmina Balcanica* has a similar role.

Statistically speaking there are quite a lot of books and a variety of authors, most of them from contemporary Romanian literature, but the question that a researcher of the phenomenon has to ask himself refers to the real impact of Romanian literature in Bulgaria? Are all those translated writers really known in Bulgaria, if not by the large public at least by specialists?

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE WORK

The practical application of such a research is quite obvious taking into consideration both cultural studies or literary theory.

The article proves that during the last 100 years the image of Bulgarian culture is vaguely mirrored in Romanian culture. The ordinary literary public does not feel the differences between each Balkan culture and is not really interested in decoding the specificity of each of it. It is obvious that one of the future works of literary critics is to educate the public so that it should be more receptive to Balkan literature and interested to discover representative author for each national culture.

It was quite difficult to answer to the question Why Bulgarian culture, literature in particular is still ignored by a large number of both ordinary readers and critics. The answer given by some Romanian authors, considering that is difficult to translate a Bulgarian writer cannot be a real one, the only cause. In the age of advanced technologies differences in languages are not to be taken into consideration and translation technique evolved. The real answer can be found by analysing the mentality and the prejudices which are still influencing cultural understanding, despite the postmodern luck of rules and boundaries. Probably the postmodern attitude finally influences mentality and soon the Balkan literature will catch the interest of a large number of readers.

Notes:

¹ One of the most important Romanian writers, Mircea Cartarescu mentioned several times that his mother's family came from Bulgaria.

² In the 18th century and beginning of the

³ At least is similar to Romania

⁴ Having a common heritage the Balkans face a large diversity of languages (of Latin origin - Romanian, Aromanian, old Thracian - Albanian, Slavic –Bulgarian, Serbian, Croatian, Greek, non-European language Turkish). Why people are not learning the language of their neighbours is another question.

⁵ International Festival of Literature-Bucharest 7-9 December 2011.

⁶ *Idées et formes littéraires françaises dans le Sud-Est de l'Europe*, 1924; *Les voyageurs orientaux en France*, 1927.

⁷ Gandirea was a literary magazine promoting traditional literature and fighting against excessive modernization and westernization. Its role in Romanian literary life was very

important, but unfortunately during its last years it had a fascist orientation, therefore it was closed down.

⁸ Translation by Maria Alexe

⁹ Paul Bailey – UK; Jean Matten – France; Roman Simic - Croatia

¹⁰ Bulgarian title: - Паякът в раната

¹¹ In an interview Visnec said that unlike other writers he is pleased to be translated in Bulgarian.

¹² Lucian Blaga – Poems of Light Поеми на светлината (original title: Poemele luminii)

¹³ Mircea Eliade - помени. Обещанията на равноденствието (1907-1937). Жътвата на слънцестоенето (1937-1960) (titlu original: Les promesses de l'equinoxe. Memoire I (1907-1937). Les Moissons du solstice. Memoire II (1937-1960))

¹⁴ "Носталгия" translated by Ivan Stankov, FABER – PRINT, publishing house.

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The paper is reviewed.