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Dynamics of synchronization(s): center—periphery, past—future

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Editor's Note

We dedicate this issue to an examination of the phenomenon of cultural synchronization, approached from the perspective developed within World Literature (WL) but not limited to it. More precisely, the volume explores the mechanisms of self-regulation and interconnection between literatures, with particular attention to those often designated—typically from a strongly Eurocentric standpoint—as “minor,” “marginal,” or “peripheral” in relation to the models or paradigms of cultural capitals, however these may be defined. As a point of departure, we draw on the theory of Romanian literary critic E. Lovinescu (1881–1943), who regarded these programmed and frequently asymmetrical connections as the most productive way for national cultures formed in the revolutionary context of the nineteenth century to evolve.

Most of the articles in this issue focus on Russian culture, either through broad overviews or through case studies relevant to the theme. Cécile Vaissié discusses the evolution of relations between Russian and French literature in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Before the October Revolution, Russian literature showed a fascination—even an obsession—with Western Europe. A major shift occurred during the Soviet period, when many French intellectuals were attracted to the Soviet project. By the 1960s, however, perspectives changed again, with Western intellectuals reevaluating official Soviet literary production and increasingly favoring dissident literature. Alexandre Stroev also examines French intellectuals' attitudes toward Soviet literature. After the 1917 Revolution, French publishers issued works by Russian émigré authors, and, following diplomatic recognition of the USSR, by innovative Soviet writers. Yet in the case of Isaak Babel, French publishers—who favored more commercially appealing novels—failed to appreciate his highly original, experimental short prose. Juan Wu, starting from the central role of synchrony in Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, focuses on the psychological and philosophical dimensions of the concept, emphasizing the instability of temporal perception.

Anna Förster investigates the rediscovery and reinterpretation of a local tradition through cultural exchange, beginning with the translation of Roland Barthes in Czechoslovakia. Based on archival documents, she shows how the reception of Barthes even contributed to rewriting the history of the Prague linguistic context and rethinking the legacy of the Prague School, long marginalized by official criticism.

Ana-Maria Dumitraşcu explores how Milan Kundera constructs the dichotomy between Eastern and Western Europe and reconfigures the question of cultural and literary synchronization between France and Central Europe, at a moment when the former periphery (Czechoslovakia) asserts itself as a space of literary innovation and challenges the dominant paradigm represented by the cultural center (Paris).

Ilinca Ilian and Elena Craşovan examine the dynamics of inter-peripheral relations, which can circumvent major cultural capitals such as Paris or Moscow. They show

that Latin American literature underwent an earlier phase of globalization in European socialist countries in the early 1950s, and they highlight its impact on Romanian literature.

Michèle Fornhoff-Levitt offers a substantial study of Yiddish theater in interwar Paris (1919–1939), contextualizing it within the synchronization theories of Lovinescu, Pascale Casanova, and Itamar Even-Zohar. The author privileges Even-Zohar’s model, arguing that it best accounts for the ways in which Yiddish theater adapted to dominant French theatrical conventions.

Shiqian Zhou shifts the discussion to East Asia, beginning with Xu Xi’s *Hong Kong Rose*. Here, additional ambivalent relationships emerge—specifically, tensions within Hong Kong identity, which resists assimilation to both Chinese nationalism and Western colonial narratives.

A number of contributions focus on the Romanian case. Catrinel Popa analyzes the figure of the foreign traveler in Romanian literature from the nineteenth century to the contemporary period, a topos that highlights the complex relationship between Romania’s Eastern heritage and the Western models it sought to emulate. Nicu Diaconiuc also examines the impressions of a foreign traveler, presenting Stanislas Bellanger’s journey to the Romanian Principalities in the 1830s as a movement from the center to the periphery of Europe. Svetlana Karadzova offers a case study of the translation of Mihai Eminescu’s “Lucefărul” (“The Evening Star”) into the Banat version of the Bulgarian literary language, and discusses synchronization through translation among interethnic subcultures within Romanian and Bulgarian literatures.

We also invited two specialists in WL, literary theory, and intellectual history—Galina Tihanov (Queen Mary University of London) and Marko Juvan (University of Ljubljana; Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts)—to contribute to the debate. Galina Tihanov critically re-reads Eastern European literatures and theoretical production, much of it shaped by experiences of exile, and argues that Pascale Casanova’s framework is overly Eurocentric, overlooking or misrepresenting cases such as Russian culture or the literatures of Central and Eastern Europe. For Tihanov, classifications such as “minor” or “peripheral” literature result from perspectives imposed by cultural centers whose authority is neither stable nor immutable. He also offers important reflections on the symbolic valences—shifting with the frame of reference—of the year 1968, both within Europe and beyond. Marko Juvan welcomes the refreshing, decolonizing potential of comparative research conducted across different sub-peripheral spaces (such as the cultures of Central, Eastern, and Southern Europe). He proposes developing a joint, comparatively oriented research program capable of placing these cultures in dialogue, enabling them to reflect one another within an integrative framework attentive to their specificities.

Synthesis

Articles

LITTÉRATURES RUSSE ET FRANÇAISE : DEUX SIÈCLES ENTRE OBSESSIONS NON-RÉCIPROQUES ET BOULEVERSEMENTS DES STATUTS

Cécile Vaissie*

Russian and French literatures: two centuries of non-reciprocal obsessions and changes of statuses

Abstract: Russian literature appeared late in comparison to French literature and under the influence of the latter, but became very quickly an essential component of world literature, with many talented, original and influential writers. Nevertheless, throughout the 19th century, and until the October Revolution, it manifested, in the works and lives of its authors, what could be called an “obsession” with the West – Western Europe –, for which there was no real reciprocity in French literature. This “obsession” disappeared in the 20th century, during which at least two major changes happened in the relations between French and Russian literatures. The first one was due to the emergence of a Soviet literature defined according to Lenin’s wishes, and to the fascination that the Soviet project then exerted on many French intellectuals. The second major change started in the 1960’s, when Western intellectual re-evaluated the works produced by an official Soviet literature that no longer attracted them: it was judged provincial, conservative and dogmatic, while a more exciting “dissident” literature had appeared, was revealing a long hidden Soviet Russia and thus modifying permanently the relationship of French intellectuals, not only to Soviet literature, but also to Soviet-style communism.

Keywords: Literature; France; Russia; socialist realism; influences.

Née tardivement par rapport à la littérature française et sous l’influence de celle-ci, la littérature russe devient en très peu de temps une composante essentielle de la littérature mondiale, pouvant revendiquer des auteurs de premier plan¹. Néanmoins, tout au long du XIX^e siècle, voire jusqu’à la

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¹ Voir : Cécile Vaissie, *Face à Marioupol. Deux siècles de littérature russe*, Rennes, Presses universitaires de Rennes, collection Épures, 2024.

révolution d'Octobre, elle manifeste, dans ses œuvres et dans la vie de ses auteurs, ce qui pourrait être appelé une « obsession » de l'Occident – l'Europe occidentale –, obsession qui n'a pas de réciproque dans la littérature française. Cette « obsession » disparaît au XX^e siècle, tandis que deux bouleversements successifs, au moins, se remarquent dans les rapports entre littératures française et russe. Le premier est dû à l'émergence d'une littérature soviétique définie selon les souhaits de Lénine, et à la fascination que le projet soviétique exerce alors sur de nombreux intellectuels français. Le deuxième, après la mort de Staline, vient du bilan que les Occidentaux tirent de la littérature soviétique officielle : celle-ci ne convainc plus, ne séduit plus, n'attire plus, contrairement à une littérature dissidente qui émerge, dévoile une Russie soviétique longtemps dissimulée et modifie durablement le rapport des intellectuels français au communisme de type soviétique.

La littérature russe du XIX^e siècle : l'influence des modèles occidentaux

Même si des textes littéraires et des auteurs ont existé en Russie avant Alexandre Pouchkine (1799–1837), celui-ci est, le plus souvent, considéré comme le créateur de la littérature russe et d'une langue littéraire, nécessaire au développement de cette littérature. Il a, en effet, su mêler harmonieusement, d'une part, des formes littéraires occidentales (notamment françaises et, dans son théâtre, britanniques) et, d'autre part, des récits, contes et chansons de la tradition orale russe. Cette littérature, très influencée par le modèle français, apparaît donc tardivement par rapport à celui-ci, comme en témoigne l'article commencé par Pouchkine en 1834 et laissé inachevé, « De l'inexistence de la littérature russe »². Pour son auteur, « la Russie est longtemps restée étrangère à l'Europe » : christianisée par Byzance, elle n'a « participé ni aux bouleversements politiques, ni à l'activité spirituelle du monde catholique romain ». Elle n'a connu ni la Renaissance, ni les Croisades, mais a été occupée par les Tatars pendant « deux siècles de ténèbres » : une période qui, présentée comme très négative par Pouchkine, expliquerait notamment le retard pris par la littérature russe sur la littérature européenne. Le poète souligne toutefois que, « même aux époques d'orages et de ruptures, tsars et boïars s'accordaient sur un point : la nécessité de rapprocher la Russie de l'Europe ». Et c'est sous Pierre le Grand

² Alexandre Pouchkine, « De l'inexistence de la littérature russe », in Pouchkine, Griboïedov, Lermontov, *Œuvres*, Paris, Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1973, p. 874–880.

que « la Russie entra en Europe comme un navire à son lancement, au bruit de la hache et au grondement des canons ». Après la mort de l'empereur, « une littérature nouvelle, fruit d'une société rénovée, devait bientôt naître » – soit, dans les faits, vers 1750.

Rappelons que Pierre le Grand est mort en 1725 et qu'à cette époque, la France avait déjà Ronsard, Marot et Du Bellay, Montaigne et Rabelais, Molière, Racine, Corneille et des dizaines d'autres. Pouchkine le reconnaît : « Au début du XVIII^e siècle, la littérature française dominait l'Europe. Elle devait avoir en Russie une influence prolongée et décisive³. » C'est pourquoi il étudie, avec finesse, cette littérature qu'il connaît à la perfection, ce qui ne lui laissera pas le temps d'évoquer, dans cet article, la littérature russe !

Certains chercheurs, comme le professeur Serge Rollet, estiment qu'au-delà même de Pouchkine, la littérature russe « s'est assez constamment construite en référence à des modèles étrangers, avant tout aux modèles français », et cela jusqu'aux années 1920 : « Elle se perçoit elle-même comme périphérique⁴. » Si un tournant se produit bien après la révolution d'Octobre, cette affirmation doit toutefois être nuancée. En effet, tout au cours du XIX^e siècle, des talents extraordinairement brillants et très différents les uns des autres apparaissent dans la littérature russe et deviennent des références dans la littérature mondiale : Tourguéniev, Dostoïevski, Tchekhov, Tolstoï, pour n'en citer que quelques-uns, avant même ce début du XX^e siècle, marqué par les premières publications d'Akhmatova, Tsvétaïeva, Pasternak et tant d'autres. En outre, si la Russie connaît, au XIX^e siècle, tous les grands courants littéraires européens, elle les adapte et se les approprie grâce aux individualités de ses auteurs.

Néanmoins, la situation de la « langue de l'autre » et le rapport au « pays de l'autre » sont très différents en Russie et en France. De nombreux auteurs russes d'alors – le plus souvent issus de la noblesse, grande ou petite – parlent plusieurs langues. Pouchkine maîtrisait ainsi parfaitement le français – la « langue de l'Europe », disait-il – et rédigeait dans cette langue une grande partie de sa correspondance. Tolstoï a écrit dans un français parfait les premières pages de *Guerre et paix*. Quel auteur français majeur pouvait revendiquer une connaissance analogue du russe ? Certains verront dans ce déséquilibre une marque de domination occidentale ; d'autres y repèreront une supériorité de ces auteurs russes, plus ouverts, plus curieux, dotés de davantage d'outils pour

³ *Idem*, p. 876.

⁴ Serge Rolet, *Qu'est-ce que la littérature russe ?*, Lille, Presses universitaires du Septentrion, 2019, p. 70.

appréhender le monde. De fait, presque tous ces auteurs russes du XIX^e – pas Pouchkine, curieusement – ont séjourné en Occident, et parfois longuement ou de façon répétée : Gogol, Tourguéniev qui a passé une grande partie de sa vie en France, Tolstoï, Dostoïevski, Tchekhov qui est mort en Allemagne. Quels auteurs français ont alors séjourné dans l'empire russe ? Balzac pour y retrouver Madame Hanska. Alexandre Dumas. Qui d'autre ?

Une littérature russe obsédée par l'Occident

Au-delà des auteurs, des personnages de textes littéraires russes parlent plusieurs langues, et le russe n'est pas toujours celle dans laquelle ils s'expriment le mieux. Ainsi, Tatiana écrit en français sa déclaration d'amour à Eugène Onéguine : elle parle et écrit mal le russe. Le professeur d'*Une banale histoire*, la nouvelle de Tchekhov, reconnaît qu'il lui est plus facile d'écrire en allemand ou en anglais qu'en russe, et ce sont des livres français qu'il dévore, tout en reconnaissant « qu'il serait plus patriotique de lire des auteurs russes », mais qu'il n'éprouve pour ceux-ci « aucune inclination particulière »⁵. Daria Mikhaïlovna, l'un des personnages de *Roudine* de Tourguéniev, tient à parler en russe, mais « les gallicismes, les mots français » lui viennent « fréquemment aux lèvres »⁶. Ces personnages aussi voyagent en Occident : ils y vont, ils en reviennent, ils rêvent d'y aller, chez Dostoïevski, chez Tourguéniev et même chez Tchekhov : dans *La Cerisaie*, Lioubov Ranievskaja rentre chez elle, après avoir passé cinq ans à l'étranger, et, à la fin de la pièce, ayant dû vendre son domaine pour combler ses dettes, elle retourne à Paris.

Dès lors, de nombreux personnages d'œuvres littéraires russes du XIX^e siècle ne cessent de comparer la Russie à l'Occident, généralement au désavantage de la première. C'est déjà le cas en 1825 dans la comédie de Griboïedov, *Le Malheur d'avoir trop d'esprit* : de retour à Moscou après trois ans passés à l'étranger, Alexandre Tchatski trouve Moscou rétrograde et conservatrice, et il se moque de la gallomanie de la haute société moscovite. Cette influence de l'Occident sur les Russes est au cœur du roman *Nid de gentilhomme* de Tourguéniev. Une comparaison implicite avec l'Europe occidentale sous-tend sans doute aussi les critiques de la société russe, qu'expriment de nombreuses

⁵ Anton Tchekhov, « Une banale histoire », traduction d'Édouard Parayre, in *Nouvelles et récits*, tome 5, Lausanne, Société coopérative éditions rencontres, 1964, p. 418.

⁶ Ivan Tourguéniev, « Roudine », traduction d'Édith Scherrer, in *Romans et nouvelles complets*, tome 1, Paris, Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1981, p. 972.

œuvres majeures de l'époque, à commencer par *Le Révizor* de Gogol ou *La Salle n°6* de Tchekhov : la Russie provinciale y est présentée comme sale et retardataire, à cause de la fainéantise et la corruption de ses dirigeants, à tous les niveaux.

Cette littérature inclut néanmoins aussi des critiques des Occidentaux. Pensons, par exemple, au poème de Pouchkine, « A ceux qui calomnient la Russie » (1831), que le philosophe ukrainien contemporain Volodymyr Yermolenko considère comme un « remarquable exemple d'un pamphlet anti-européen, véhiculant un impérialisme russe agressif »⁷. Mais même ces critiques de l'Occident démontrent que celui-ci est une référence. Et si des incompréhensions, voire certains ressentiments, se remarquent parfois, il n'empêche : pendant tout le XIX^e siècle, l'Occident – c'est-à-dire l'Europe occidentale – reste étonnement présent dans la vie de la plupart des auteurs russes et dans leurs œuvres, si bien qu'il n'est pas exagéré de parler d'« obsession » de l'Occident. Cette « obsession » est d'autant plus forte qu'elle reflète certaines des « éternelles questions » que la littérature russe explore sans relâche : qui sommes-nous ? Où se situe la Russie ? Vers où va-t-elle ? Rien de tel en France, même si des générations d'enfants français ont dévoré *Michel Strogoff* de Jules Verne et les œuvres de la comtesse de Ségur – « née Rostopchine », précisait chaque édition.

C'est même en fonction du modèle occidental que se définissent alors les intellectuels russes, qui se veulent « occidentalistes » ou « slavophiles », selon s'ils appellent à suivre le modèle occidental ou à privilégier les spécificités russes. Parmi ces « slavophiles », certains considèrent – comme l'a clamé Dostoïevski dans son *Discours sur Pouchkine* (1880) – que le « peuple russe » sait incarner aussi le génie d'un autre peuple et « se réincarner dans une autre nationalité »⁸. Pour Dostoïevski, « la puissance de l'esprit national russe » est même dans « sa tendance, à travers les buts finis qu'il se propose, à l'universalité, à l'intégralité humaine »⁹ :

⁷ Volodymyr Yermolenko, « From Pushkin to Putin: Russian Literature's Imperial Ideology », *Foreign Policy*, 25 juin 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/06/25/russia-ukraine-war-literature-classics-imperialism-ideology-nationalism-putin-pushkin-tolstoy-dostoevsky-caucasus/>.

⁸ Fédor Dostoïevski, « Discours sur Pouchkine », traduction de Jean Chuzeville, in *Les Œuvres littéraires de Dostoïevski, tome XVI*, Lausanne, Société coopérative Éditions Rencontre, 1961, p. 533–534.

⁹ *Idem*, p. 535–536.

Être un vrai Russe, être pleinement Russe, cela veut dire uniquement (retenez bien ceci) être le frère de tous les hommes, un pan-humain, si vous voulez. [...] À un vrai Russe, l'Europe et les destinées de la grande race aryenne¹⁰ tout entière sont aussi chères que la Russie elle-même, que les destinées de la terre natale ; car notre destin est l'universalité, non pas acquise par le glaive, mais par la fraternité, par notre fraternel effort en vue de ramener à l'unité les hommes¹¹.

Des accents impérialistes se perçoivent sous les proclamations de fraternité et se retrouveront chez les autorités soviétiques qui interdiront pourtant, d'abord l'essentiel, puis certaines des œuvres de Dostoïevski. Car, oui, la révolution d'Octobre 1917 marque un tournant abrupt dans la conception d'une littérature qui, de russe, doit devenir soviétique.

*Sous Lénine et Staline, un bouleversement
dans la définition même de la littérature*

Avec l'arrivée des Bolchéviks au pouvoir, la littérature est entièrement redéfinie en URSS, en fonction de ce que Lénine écrivait, dès 1905, dans son article « L'organisation du Parti et la littérature du Parti »¹². Il y déclarait que la littérature « ne saurait être une affaire individuelle, indépendante de la cause générale du prolétariat », et devait « devenir une littérature de Parti » :

Les journaux doivent devenir les organes des différentes organisations du Parti. Les écrivains doivent absolument rejoindre les organisations du Parti. Les maisons d'éditions et les dépôts, les magasins et les salles de lecture, les bibliothèques et les diverses librairies doivent devenir des entreprises du Parti soumises à son contrôle¹³.

Il fallait, estimait Lénine, mettre fin à un « vieux principe russe » : « L'écrivain écrit quand ça lui chante, et le lecteur lit s'il lui chante ». Or,

¹⁰ NdA : Replaçons les mots dans leur contexte : la formule, choquante aujourd'hui, de « grande race aryenne » n'avait pas du tout les mêmes implications en 1880, avant le nazisme et les progrès de la génétique.

¹¹ Fédor Dostoïevski, *op. cit.*, p. 536–537.

¹² Vladimir Lénine, « L'organisation du Parti et la littérature du Parti », in *Œuvres, tome 10*, Paris, Éditions sociales, Moscou, Éditions du Progrès, 1975, p. 37–43.

¹³ *Ibidem*.

jusqu'à la fin des années 1980, les autorités soviétiques ont constamment cité ce texte de 1905 pour justifier la totale soumission de la littérature aux buts du Parti¹⁴.

Il faudra néanmoins une quinzaine d'années au pouvoir soviétique pour, en poussant certains auteurs à l'exil ou au silence, en suscitant les peurs ou les envies de plaire, imposer pleinement son projet littéraire. Celui-ci est formulé, de façon détaillée, lors du premier Congrès de l'Union des écrivains d'URSS en août 1934 : la littérature soviétique doit être un outil au service du projet politique ; elle doit donc, non plus explorer les sentiments ni les émotions, mais créer un « homme nouveau » qui sera à la fois le constructeur du communisme et son résultat. L'esthétique de cette littérature – le réalisme socialiste –, ses sujets et ses personnages sont également imposés¹⁵. Des écrivains s'adapteront aux nouvelles exigences, d'autres pas, et beaucoup seront éliminés.

Pleinement impliquée dans le projet politique, cette littérature soviétique est donc censée devenir un modèle pour les partisans de l'URSS dans le monde, et non plus s'inspirer des littératures occidentales ou entretenir un dialogue avec celles-ci. Le rapport entre elles est renversé, et ce bouleversement est d'autant plus marqué que l'URSS s'est refermée sur elle-même dès le début des années 1920, rompant avec les influences, voire les modes occidentales. Plus question – sauf exceptions et accord du Parti – de séjourner en Occident ! L'enseignement des langues aussi est limité et les contacts avec les écrivains occidentaux, surveillés et instrumentalisés.

Car, désormais, ce sont les intellectuels occidentaux – dont les Français – qui sont incités à se rendre en URSS, un pays qui fascine une partie d'entre eux et qui inaugure une politique très volontariste pour encourager et organiser ces voyages. À partir de 1926–1927, des auteurs de premier plan se rendent donc en URSS : André Mazon, Georges Duhamel, futur membre de l'Académie française, Henri Barbusse en 1932. Il y aura aussi Aragon, un visiteur régulier, qui a assisté avec les époux Bloch et André Malraux au Congrès de 1934 ; Roman Rolland en juin 1935 ; Drieu la Rochelle en septembre 1935 ; Céline en 1936 ; Gide et certains de ses amis en 1936 également, etc¹⁶. En URSS, ils sont reçus par leurs collègues et par des personnalités officielles – parfois par

¹⁴ Voir : Cécile Vaissié, *Les Ingénieurs des âmes en chef. Littérature et politique en URSS (1944–1986)*, Paris, Belin, collection « Littérature et politique », 2008, p. 27–28.

¹⁵ *Idem*, p. 30–38.

¹⁶ Ludmila Stern, *Western Intellectuals and the Soviet Union, 1920–1940, From Red Square to the Left Bank*, London and New York, Routledge, 2007, e-book.

Staline lui-même ; ils rencontrent leurs lecteurs, et leurs œuvres, traduites en russe, sont, dans certains cas, tirées à des centaines de milliers d'exemplaires¹⁷.

De nombreux intellectuels occidentaux se sont donc rendus en URSS entre les deux guerres, dont environ 200 Français rien qu'en 1935¹⁸. Le flux Russie-Occident des voyages d'écrivains est ainsi inversé, ce qui reflète les modifications des influences littéraires. Au-delà des seuls écrivains, le nombre de visiteurs venant en URSS double chaque année à partir de 1929 et atteint un pic vers 1934–1936¹⁹. Il s'accompagne, en Occident, de récits, d'essais et d'interviews de ces voyageurs censés chanter les louanges de l'URSS. Celle-ci est désormais, pour une partie du monde intellectuel occidental, ce que n'a jamais été la Russie impériale : un modèle.

Des « passeurs » se distinguent : les quelques Soviétiques autorisés à voyager ; Ehrenbourg, le seul journaliste autorisé par les autorités soviétiques à séjourner longuement en Occident ; les Français qui se rendent en URSS, dont, en premier lieu, Aragon qui va de plus en plus s'imposer dans ce rôle d'intermédiaire, y compris parce que sa femme, Elsa Triolet, est née dans l'empire russe et qu'il est donc le beau-frère de Lili Brik, le grand amour de Vladimir Maïakovski. Néanmoins, à partir de 1937, à cause des purges et des menaces de guerre, le flot de visiteurs étrangers s'épuise, puis se tarit.

Dans l'entre-deux-guerres, l'influence soviétique a donc été sensible dans les champs politique et intellectuel français. Elle reste toutefois limitée dans la littérature, en particulier sur le plan formel. Même Louis Aragon se garde bien d'appliquer le réalisme socialiste dans ses propres écrits. Il aurait appelé cela son « pari » : « Ne surtout pas imiter les œuvres soviétiques, tout en proclamant l'excellence de leur méthode »²⁰. Après la guerre, lorsque certains dirigeants communistes français prônent l'implantation en France du modèle littéraire soviétique, des auteurs, dont Aragon, le refusent²¹. André Stil est

¹⁷ Leonid Maksimenkov, « Očerki nomenklaturnoj istorii sovsedkoj literatury. Zapadnye poligrimy u stalinskogo prestola (Fejxtvanger i drugie) », *Voprosy literatury*, 2004, n° 2, p. 243.

¹⁸ Ludmila Stern, *op. cit.*

¹⁹ *Ibidem.*

²⁰ Reynald Lahanque, « Les romans du réalisme socialiste en France », in *Le Réalisme socialiste en France*, numéro spécial de *Sociétés & Représentations*, n°15, 2002, p. 177–178. Voir aussi, dans le même numéro : Philippe Olivera, « Aragon, "réaliste socialiste" ». Les usages d'une étiquette littéraire des années Trente aux années Soixante », p. 232.

²¹ André Stil, *Une vie à écrire. Entretiens avec Jean-Claude Lebrun*, Paris, Stock, Grasset, 1993, p. 70–71. Voir aussi : Gisèle Sapero, « Formes et structures de l'engagement des écrivains communistes en France de la "drôle de guerre" à la Guerre froide », in *Le Réalisme socialiste en*

alors pratiquement le seul écrivain en France, à reprendre dans son œuvre les thématiques et le style du réalisme socialiste soviétique. Cela assurera sa réussite dans le « bloc de l'Est » : il y a été, pendant une période assez brève, l'un des écrivains français les plus traduits, car il a été le seul Occidental à recevoir, en mars 1952, un prix Staline de littérature²². Mais qui, aujourd'hui, se souvient de son œuvre ?

Un nouveau basculement après la mort de Staline

Les contacts entre écrivains soviétiques et français, notamment les voyages en URSS de ces derniers, reprennent après la mort de Staline, dans un cadre très institutionnalisé²³. Par ailleurs, quelques publications soviétiques d'un ton nouveau suscitent l'intérêt, en URSS, mais aussi en Occident, et, en novembre 1962, la parution du premier livre d'Alexandre Soljénitsyne, *Une journée d'Ivan Dénissovitch*, marque un tournant. Ce texte qui, autorisé par Khrouchtchev, raconte le quotidien dans les camps staliniens est un immense succès en URSS. Elsa Triolet souhaite le publier en France, mais René Julliard est plus rapide et devient ainsi, comme le soulignera Iona Popa, le premier éditeur non communiste à emprunter le circuit officiel pour traduire un auteur soviétique contemporain²⁴. Soljénitsyne est désormais célèbre en Occident et en URSS, mais il n'est déjà plus publié dans son pays natal. Or les écrivains occidentaux sont de plus en plus déçus par ce qu'est devenue la littérature soviétique officielle, figée dans son refus d'innover et l'obligation de rester fidèle à des conceptions dogmatiques.

Ce nouveau tournant s'affiche lorsque, en août 1963, la COMES organise à Leningrad un congrès sur le thème du roman. Cette COMES (Communauté européenne des écrivains) a été créée à Naples en octobre 1958, pour encourager les échanges entre écrivains de l'Est et de l'Ouest, et les Soviétiques y ont adhéré dès sa fondation²⁵. Juste après celle-ci, l'affaire Pasternak se déclenche :

France, op. cit., p. 155–176.

²² Cécile Vaissié, « L'unique Occidental, Prix Staline de littérature : André Stil, un "ingénieur des âmes" en France », *Arhivele totalitarismului*, Bucarest, The National Institute for the Study of Totalitarianism, n°94–95, 1–2/2017, p. 105–125.

²³ Voir : Cécile Vaissié, *Sartre et l'URSS. Le Joueur et les survivants*, Rennes, Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2023.

²⁴ Ioana Popa, *Traduire sous contraintes. Littérature et communisme (1947–1989)*, Paris, CNRS éditions, collection « Société », 2010, p. 334.

²⁵ Nicole Racine, « La COMES (1958–1968) », tapuscrit donné par l'auteurice.

le poète russe reçoit le prix Nobel pour un roman qui dénonce la destruction de l'intelligentsia par la Révolution et qui, n'ayant pu être publié en URSS, l'a été en Italie ; une campagne très violente est donc lancée en URSS pour contraindre le lauréat à renoncer au Nobel. Ce qu'il fait, mais qui n'empêchera pas le triomphe mondial de son roman²⁶.

En août 1963, plus de 40 écrivains soviétiques et 83 écrivains étrangers, dont 44 des pays capitalistes, participent à la rencontre de Leningrad²⁷. Ceux d'URSS et du « bloc de l'Est » ont été sélectionnés sur le volet et, surveillés par le secteur idéologique du Comité central du PCUS, ils reçoivent des instructions sur ce qu'ils peuvent dire, ou pas. Dirigée par le poète André Frénaud, la délégation française comprend Alain Robbe-Grillet, Nathalie Sarraute et le romancier Bernard Pingaud. Beauvoir, Sartre et André Stil ont été invités personnellement par l'Union des écrivains, tandis que l'UNESCO est représenté par René Maheu et Roger Caillois²⁸.

En fait, cette rencontre se passe mal. Dès le premier jour, Constantin Fédine, numéro 1 de l'Union des écrivains, attaque ce qu'il appelle « l'esthétique de la décadence », celle de « Joyce, Proust et Kafka », que les Occidentaux tenteraient de promouvoir et que refuse l'Union soviétique²⁹. Puis le très célèbre Léonid Léonov déplore que le dernier congrès de la COMES ait proclamé « la liberté pour les auteurs de choisir n'importe quel sujet » :

On a pu constater le succès tout particulier de différents vices sexuels qui se signalent à l'attention par un symptôme qui les apparente, c'est qu'il n'en résulte pas d'enfants³⁰.

Les polémiques sont lancées, d'autant que les Soviétiques, arcboutés sur leurs positions, refusent le « nouveau roman » qui triomphe alors en France.

²⁶ Cécile Vaissié, *Les Ingénieurs des âmes en chef*, op. cit., p. 207–222.

²⁷ RGANI (Archives d'État de Russie pour l'Histoire du Temps présent) 5/ 55 / 45 / p. 116–125.

²⁸ RGALI (Archives d'État de Russie pour la Littérature et l'Art) 631 / 26 / 6262 / p. 36–37. Bernard Pingaud, « L'année dernière à Leningrad », *Esprit*, juillet 1964, p. 16.

²⁹ Evgenija Knipovič, « Na međunarodnyx vstrečax », in *Vospominanija o Konstantine Fedine. Sbornik*, Moscou, Sovetskij Pisatel', 1988, p. 452–454. Konstantin Fedin, « Sud'ba romana », in *Sobranie sočinenij, tom 9*, Moscou, Xudožestvennaja literatura, 1973, p. 473–481. Konstantin Fedin, « Sud'ba romana », *Literaturnaja Gazeta*, 6 août 1963, p. 1 et 4.

³⁰ Leonid Léonov, « Pourquoi les Occidentaux vivent-ils à l'enseigne du "tout est permis" ? », *Esprit*, juillet 1964, p. 44.

Giancarlo Vigorelli, entre autres, accuse la littérature des pays socialistes d'être provinciale et moralisatrice, ces accusations étant, bien évidemment, contestées par des intervenants soviétiques³¹.

Mais même le secteur idéologique du Comité central souligne, dans son bilan du 26 août 1963³², les désaccords constatés : si les débats ont commencé « assez tranquillement », « les points de vue se sont violemment affrontés » à certains moments. En effet, « la majorité des écrivains bourgeois, venus à la conférence, ont des positions littéraires et esthétiques très éloignés de nous », si bien que des propos ont été « dirigés contre les principes de l'art soviétique ». Le fond des dissensions est précisé : la littérature a-t-elle, ou non, une fonction précise ? Quelle est la responsabilité de l'artiste devant sa société ? Un « antifasciste » peut-il se livrer à des expériences formalistes ? Or, ces dissensions découlent de la définition même de la littérature soviétique, telle que donnée par Lénine en 1905, puis proclamée en 1934 au Congrès de l'Union des écrivains.

Et quand, quelques jours après la rencontre de Leningrad, une revue chinoise demande à Sartre qui représente le mieux, pour lui, la littérature soviétique actuelle, le philosophe cite Soljénitsyne et dit souhaiter qu'il y ait davantage de tels livres dont « la principale qualité » serait « un sentiment très fort de vérité »³³. Un basculement s'est produit : si la littérature soviétique officielle ne présente plus d'intérêt pour les intellectuels occidentaux, ceux-ci suivent désormais de près des auteurs soviétiques dont les textes, ne pouvant pas ou plus être publiés en URSS, vont bientôt être diffusés par le samizdat et le tamizdat.

Le samizdat, le tamizdat et la littérature « dissidente »

Le samizdat – littéralement, « publié par soi » – est apparu en URSS à la fin des années 1950 et est, en fait, un mode de diffusion, permettant à des textes de circuler sans passer par la censure. Chaque lecteur reproduit lui-même, en plusieurs exemplaires, des textes qui l'intéressent, puis il fait circuler ces copies. Il peut s'agir de manuscrits soviétiques inédits – romans, souvenirs, essais, poèmes... –, d'œuvres occidentales interdites, de livres parus en Russie ou en URSS, mais non réédités depuis, ou de revues composées spécialement, etc. Ces textes sont tapés à la machine en quelques exemplaires avec des papiers carbone,

³¹ RGANI 5 / 55 / 45 / p. 116–125.

³² *Ibidem*.

³³ RGALI 631 / 26 / 6268 / p. 15–16.

ou photographiés et tirés sur papier, beaucoup plus rarement photocopiés : les photocopies sont rares et contrôlées en URSS³⁴. Une « seconde culture » apparaît ainsi, qui ne se limite pas au samizdat, mais dans laquelle celui-ci joue un rôle essentiel³⁵.

Peu après s'amorce un autre phénomène qui s'appuiera largement sur le samizdat : le tamizdat (publié « là-bas », en Occident). Des textes soviétiques sont publiés en Occident, alors qu'ils ne l'ont pas été en URSS et ne passent pas par les canaux de diffusion officiels. Certes, des pratiques du même ordre ont déjà existé dans le passé, mais, pour reprendre la formulation de Friederike Kind-Kovacs, c'est *Le Docteur Jivago* de Pasternak qui « pose les bases d'un demi-siècle de tamizdat soviétique »³⁶. Une dynamique est mise en marche et les parutions occidentales d'écrits soviétiques « dissidents » se multiplient. Certains sont liés au combat pour les droits de l'homme, mais d'autres sont des textes littéraires ou des recherches historiques, et ils révèlent les réalités d'un pays, longtemps masquées et tues³⁷. Parmi ces auteurs du tamizdat qui supplantent les écrivains officiels, jusque-là diffusés à l'Ouest, le plus célèbre, le plus influent et, sans doute, le plus controversé est Alexandre Soljénitsyne.

Celui-ci a été connu dans le monde entier dès son premier livre, *Une journée d'Ivan Dénissovitch*, mais, très vite, il n'est plus publié en URSS. Il engage néanmoins un bras de fer contre l'Union des écrivains pour que deux de ses romans, *Le Premier Cercle* et *Le Pavillon des cancéreux*, soient publiés en URSS : en vain. Ces romans commencent à circuler en samizdat vers 1966³⁸ et, repris par le tamizdat, paraissent en France, respectivement, en 1968 et 1969, et ailleurs dans le monde. Déjà, Soljénitsyne a fait passer de l'autre côté du Rideau de fer un premier exemplaire de *L'Archipel du Goulag*,

³⁴ Voir : Cécile Vaissié, *Pour votre liberté et pour la nôtre. Le combat des dissidents de Russie*, Paris, Robert Laffont, 1999.

³⁵ Cécile Vaissié, « La multiplicité des cultures dans la Russie de la stagnation (1968–1985) : un témoin des ruptures entre pouvoir et société », in Jean-François Sirinelli, Georges-Henri Soutou (dir.), *Culture et Guerre froide*, Paris, Presses de l'université Paris-Sorbonne, 2008, p. 269–280.

³⁶ Friederike Kind-Kovacs, *Written here, published there. How Underground Literature Crossed the Iron Curtain*, New York, Budapest, Central European University Press, 2014, p. 19.

³⁷ Manuela Putz, Cécile Vaissié, « “Dissidentskaja literatura” na zapadnoevropejskom knižnom rynku. Logika izdatel'skoj dejatel'nosti i mezličnostnye otnošenija (1960–1980 gg.) », in Boris Belenkin, Elena Strukova (dir.), *Acta samizdatica – Zapiski o samizdate*, tom 4, Moscou, 2018, p. 140–164.

³⁸ Alexandre Soljénitsyne, *Le grain tombé entre les meules*, traduit du russe par Geneviève et José Johannet, Paris, Fayard, 1998, p. 175.

puis en a transmis un second à Nikita Struve, universitaire et directeur de la maison d'édition YMCA Press, l'une des principales maisons d'édition en langue russe à l'étranger. Des contacts clandestins se nouent entre Soljénitsyne et Struve : en juin 1971, *Août quatorze* paraît, en russe, à Paris³⁹. Quelques mois plus tôt, l'écrivain a reçu le Prix Nobel de littérature. C'est alors que Le Seuil commence à publier, en français, une grande partie de l'œuvre de Soljénitsyne, à commencer par *Août quatorze* (1972), la *Lettre aux dirigeants de l'Union soviétique et autres textes* (1974), *L'Archipel du Goulag* en trois tomes (1974, 1974 et 1976) – et c'est après la parution du premier tome en russe, à Paris, mais avant celle de sa traduction française, que Soljénitsyne est expulsé d'URSS. Et quand Claude Durand, éditeur de Soljénitsyne au Seuil, passera chez Grasset, puis chez Fayard, Soljénitsyne l'accompagnera, avec, notamment, *La Roue rouge*. De cette façon, écrira Claude Durand en 2005, « la France est le seul pays au monde à avoir traduit et publié l'intégralité de l'œuvre connue » de cet écrivain, alors que, à part l'Allemagne, « le reste des pays européens ont peu à peu décroché, notamment devant la *Roue rouge* dont le volume implique des coûts de traduction très élevés »⁴⁰.

La passion de la France pour cet auteur, très controversé par certains, s'avère proportionnelle à l'engouement de celle-ci pour le projet soviétique. Or, si Soljénitsyne se pense en écrivain, s'inscrivant dans la lignée de Dostoïevski et de Tolstoï qui ont, chacun à sa façon, dénoncé les bagnes russes, l'impact qu'il a en France et en Occident est largement politique : c'est le projet communiste, et donc le PCF, voire l'Union de la gauche, que *L'Archipel du Goulag* met en cause et, *de facto*, détruit. Le rôle de cette littérature russe aura été immense en France.

Conclusion

La fascination qu'exerce la littérature russe – désormais « dissidente » – sur les Français et, à des degrés divers, les Occidentaux est réactivée avec les redécouvertes culturelles de la perestroïka. Les textes qui circulaient peu avant en samizdat et tamizdat paraissent alors dans les plus grandes revues et chez les principaux éditeurs soviétiques. Ces parutions seraient des gages, donnés par le pouvoir, de la réalité des changements. Au point que l'on peut se demander

³⁹ *Idem*, p. 205.

⁴⁰ Claude Durand, *Agent de Soljénitsyne*, Paris, Fayard, 2011, p. 250–251.

aujourd'hui s'il ne s'agissait pas d'un rideau de fumée, censé cacher des réalités plus sombres.

Après la chute de l'URSS, le monde éditorial russe se modifie en profondeur ; les maisons d'édition se multiplient, la censure a été supprimée et la littérature russe devient sans doute aussi diverse, pour ses thématiques et la qualité de ses textes, que les littératures occidentales. Des éditeurs russes publient des auteurs français – aussi grâce à d'excellents traducteurs littéraires – et des éditeurs français s'intéressent aux Russes, même si ceux-ci sont sans doute moins « à la mode » que dans les années précédentes. Pas grand-monde ne s'attendait à ce que, à partir de 2014, et, plus encore, de 2022, des auteurs et des éditeurs russes s'enfuient à l'étranger et que la censure renforcée amène, non seulement à des retraits de livres, mais aussi à des mises en examen d'éditeurs. Nul doute que de nouveaux bouleversements suivront, dans les rapports entre littératures russe et française.

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LA LITTÉRATURE SOVIÉTIQUE EN FRANCE DANS LES ANNÉES 1920–1930 : LE CAS D’ISAAC BABEL

Alexandre Stroev*

Soviet literature in France in the 1920s and 1930s: the case of Isaac Babel

Abstract: At the turn of the 19th century, the political and military alliance between France, England and Russia led Parisian publishers to promote Russian novelists, above all Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy. After the revolution of 1917, they published Russian writers who had emigrated to France. Since the diplomatic recognition of the USSR in 1924, they promoted Soviet authors. Boris Pilniak, Vsevolod Ivanov and Isaak Babel embody an innovative and revolutionary literature. However, in France, the strengths of Babel’s prose – the perfect mastery of the short story genre with a paradoxical ending, the mix of high and low styles, of the sophisticated and the illiterate – were transformed into weaknesses. Publishers prefer novels that are easy to read and sell. The efforts of translators to render the originality of Babel’s works are at odds with editorial demand. In the USSR, Stalinist policies and the domination of socialist realism silenced the writer, who was arrested in 1939 and shot in 1940.

Keywords: Soviet literature, Isaac Babel, Vladimir Pozner, translation, editorial demand

Si jusqu’aux années 1880, la littérature russe reste à la périphérie du mouvement littéraire européen, au tournant du siècle tout change. Tolstoï et Dostoïevski sont les romanciers européens les plus estimés, les plus lus en France. L’alliance politique et militaire entre la France, l’Angleterre et la Russie pousse les éditeurs à promouvoir la littérature russe, chercher un auteur qui pourrait recevoir un prix Nobel.

Paris demeure sans conteste la capitale artistique du monde. Les sculpteurs et les peintres, y compris ceux furent la zone de résidence des Juifs en Russie (Ossip

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Zadkine, Chana Orloff, Marc Chagall, Chaïm Soutine et d'autres), peuplent le quartier de Montparnasse. Depuis 1906–1907, les saisons russes de Sergueï Diaghilev impressionnent les Parisiens. Les symbolistes russes, avant tout Valeri Brussov et Maximilian Volochine, tissent des liens avec les auteurs français. Sous la férule de Valeri Brussov poète et traducteur Jean Chuzeville fait paraître juste avant la guerre l'*Anthologie des poètes russes* (1914). Entre la révolution russe de 1905 et le début de la guerre de 1914–1918, les écrivains et les philosophes Dmitri Merejkovski, Zénaïde Hippisus, Dmitri Philosophoff, Constantin Balmont, Maximilian Volochine, Nikolai Goumilev, Anna Akhmatova et d'autres habitent Paris. La reconnaissance française cautionne la renommée mondiale¹.

Après la révolution de 1917 et la guerre civile (1918–1920), des intellectuels russes émigrent en masse. Ils s'installent à Berlin où après la crise économique la vie n'est pas chère (ils quittent l'Allemagne après l'arrivée d'Hitler au pouvoir), et à Paris, sans oublier Prague et Belgrade.

Les artistes-peintres, danseurs, chanteurs et musiciens peuvent gagner leur vie à l'étranger. D'autres tentent leur chance avec un nouvel art, le cinéma. Les romanciers, avant tout des auteurs des romans historiques, comme Mark Aldanov et Dmitri Merejkovski, trouvent des éditeurs. Les poètes restent dans leur pays : la grande poésie est intraduisible et surtout ne rapporte rien. Les tentatives de Marina Tsvetadeva d'écrire des poèmes en français se soldent par un échec : la syntaxe et la métrique de ces sùvres, à mon avis, magnifiques, ne correspondent pas au goût du public qui préfère le vers libre². Vladislav Khodassevitch publie à Paris des poèmes en russe. Pour la génération suivante des écrivains émigrés russes, la situation sera encore plus difficile. Dans son rapport, présenté à la Société des écrivains soviétiques en 1933, Isaac Babel loue Vladimir Nabokov³. Cependant, le jeune Jean-Paul Sartre dans son article « Vladimir Nabokov : *La Méprise* » (juin 1939) étrille le roman qu'il considère comme un pastiche de Dostoevski et lui oppose *L'Envie* de Iouri Olecha (1927). Ajoutons, que la même année il maltraite violemment la prose de Mauriac (« M. François Mauriac et la liberté », février 1939).

¹ Voir : Alexandre Stroev [dir.], *Les intellectuels russes à la conquête de l'opinion publique française : une histoire alternative de la littérature russe en France de Cantemir à Gorki*, Paris, PSN, 2019.

² Voir l'étude magistrale de Mikhail Gasparov : М.Л. Гаспаров, « Русский “Молодец” и французский “Молодец”: два стиховых эксперимента », *Idem, Избранные труды*, т. 3. *О стихе*. Moscou, 1997, p. 267–278.

³ Г.М. Фрейдин, « Вопрос возвращения II: “Великий перелом” и Запад в биографии И. Э. Бабеля начала 1930–х годов », *Stanford Slavic Studies*, vol. 4, part II. 1992, p. 190–240.

Au début des années 1920, les éditeurs français préfèrent publier des écrivains russes émigrés en France, comme Ivan Bounine. Cependant, des nouveautés percent peu à peu. Le poème *Les douze* d'Alexandre Blok, traduit par Serge Romoff⁴, est édité par Iakov Povolotski avec des illustrations de Mikhaïl Larionov (Paris, La Cible, 1920). Dans la revue *Clarté*, les journalistes communistes Victor Serge (Kibaltchitch) et Maurice Parijanine (Donzel) présentent les nouveautés littéraires en URSS, traduisent Alexandre Blok, Andreï Biély, Boris Pilniak (*Riazan-la-Pomme*, 1923). Le recueil *Scènes de la Révolution russe*, « traduit du russe avec l'autorisation des auteurs par Serge Lieskov », réunit les œuvres d'Ilya Ehrenbourg, Nikolaï Nikitine, Boris Pilniak et Alekseï Rémisov⁵ (Paris, la Renaissance du livre, 1923 « Collection littéraire et artistique internationale »). En juin 1924, le recueil littéraire mensuel parisien *Les œuvres libres*, édité par Arthème Fayard, publie dans son numéro XXXIV les « nouvelles inédites de la jeune littérature russe » : *Le matin* de Nikolaï Nikitine, *Bielokonskoïe* de Boris Pilniak et *L'Enfant* de Vsevolod Ivanov. Cette dernière nouvelle, parue en Russie en 1922, produit une forte impression en France. Peut-être, parce qu'elle reprend, sans l'évoquer directement, le dilemme de l'enfant martyr, lancé Ivan Karamazov (*Les Frères Karamazov*, chapitre « La révolte »): peut-on sacrifier l'enfant pour une « bonne » cause⁶? J'ajoute que plus tard cette nouvelle sera interdite en URSS.

En octobre 1924, la France reconnaît officiellement l'Union Soviétique. Les éditeurs parisiens se lancent sur un nouveau marché. Les communications postales sont rétablies, on peut se procurer assez aisément à Paris des livres, des journaux et des revues soviétiques, déclare en juin 1925 Boris Schloezer dans son article « Quelques jeunes Russes ». Les critiques font la promotion de la nouvelle littérature soviétique. Même si à l'entre-deux-guerres Paris reste la capitale littéraire et artistique du monde, c'est Moscou qui porte la flamme d'une révolution littéraire : Boris Pilniak, Isaac Babel, Evgueni Zamiatine, Vsevolod Ivanov, Mikhaïl Zochtenko. La nouvelle littérature soviétique, aussi bien que la littérature américaine, considérées auparavant comme marginaux, conquièrent le centre, Paris.

⁴ Sergueï Matveevitch Romov (Solomon Davidovich Roffman, 1883–1939, fusillé), journaliste, critique d'art et traducteur. Révolutionnaire, il émigre en France en 1906 et rentre en URSS en 1928.

⁵ Sur l'histoire des publications d'Alekseï Remizov en France voir : Michel Niqueux, « Sept lettres autobiographiques d'Alexis Remizov à Dominique Arban », *Revue des études slaves*, t. 74, fascicule 1, 2002, p. 171–191.

⁶ Voir la séance du Studio franco-russe du 4 novembre 1930 et la communication de Ioulia Sazonova « Les grands problèmes de la vie dans la littérature soviétique ».

L'absence de convention qui régit les droits d'auteur entre la France et l'URSS laisse carte blanche aux éditeurs et aux traducteurs. Vladimir Pozner écrit à Victor Chklovski le 3 janvier 1925 que les éditeurs ne rémunèrent pas les écrivains russes et lui propose un tiers de ses honoraires, mille francs ou plus, si *Le Voyage sentimental* se vend bien⁷. Cinq ans plus tard, le 29 octobre 1930, Vsevolod Ivanov écrit à Vladimir Pozner que seuls les scrupuleux Allemands le payent, les autres, pas un sou⁸. Ensuite, l'écrivain demande au traducteur de lui envoyer, en guise d'honoraires, des vêtements pour lui, sa femme et ses deux fils, sans oublier le chocolat.

Entre 1924 et 1927, les éditeurs russes établis à Paris, Viktor Khovine et Iakov Povolotski, ainsi que des périodiques des émigrés russes (*Звено, Версты*) publient des nouvelles d'Isaac Babel, déjà parues en URSS, sans demander l'autorisation de l'auteur. Les traductions suivent.

Cependant, les émigrés russes et les Français de gauche qui traduisent les œuvres de Babel doivent faire face à deux obstacles majeurs. En Russie et en URSS, la nouvelle est un genre littéraire prisé, tandis qu'en France de l'entre-deux-guerres elle est boudée. Éditeurs et lecteurs demandent des romans. *Cavalerie rouge* est le seul livre qui paraît en France du vivant de Babel et qui fait sa réputation. Cependant, les lecteurs français se perdent face à la multitude des personnages et à la narration non-linéaire. Le second obstacle, c'est l'écriture de Babel, un mélange subtil de style recherché dans la narration, plein de métaphores, et de parler grossier, incorrect et savoureux des personnages, pétri de néologismes soviétiques. Sans oublier des réalités du quotidien ukrainien ou moscovite, des enjeux politiques qui, hélas, échappent aux lecteurs et, quelquefois, piègent les traducteurs, même les plus qualifiés.

Boris Schlœzer

En 1925, Boris Schlœzer (1881–1969), musicologue et écrivain, traducteur de Dostoïevski, Tchekhov, Tolstoï, Gogol, Lermontov, qui ne porte pas dans son cœur les bolchéviks, s'adapte, publie un article « Quelques jeunes Russes » où il loue les nouvelles de Babel :

⁷ *Диалог писателей [Dialogue d'écrivains. Pages d'histoire des relations culturelles franco-russes au XX^e siècle]*, Moscou, IMLI, 2002, p. 209. Aux éditions Simon Kra, le livre est réimprimé au moins sept fois.

⁸ IMEC (Institut mémoires de l'édition contemporaine), F. 227 PZN (Pozner) / 115/42.

Ce qui fait la grande originalité et la valeur de ces récits, c'est que Babel, lui, est parvenu à saisir la réalité nouvelle qui éclot en Russie non du dehors, non en spectateur, mais du dedans, comme un acteur agissant sur cette même scène qu'il s'agit de décrire. [...] il voit le monde à travers ces personnages, nés de la guerre et de la Révolution ; il possède leur sensibilité, leurs habitudes intellectuelles, et il décrit cet univers étrange selon des procédés littéraires et dans un style qui lui appartiennent bien en propre. [...] Ces personnages parlent une langue brutale et naïve, mais émaillée de formules littéraires puisées dans ces mêmes brochures de propagande et imitées du jargon des agitateurs. De loin, ce langage peut nous paraître ridicule, prétentieux, presque monstrueux, mais il est bien vivant et très expressif à sa manière.

Les puristes n'y pourront rien, c'est ainsi que parle aujourd'hui la grande majorité du peuple russe, c'est ainsi qu'il s'efforce d'exprimer sa mentalité nouvelle.

Babel est-il ou non pro-bolcheviste ? Cette réalité qu'il décrit veut-il nous en inspirer l'horreur ou l'admiration ?⁹

En novembre 1925, Boris Schloezer publie ses traductions des récits « La Lettre » et « La Mort de Dolgouchev »¹⁰. Autant que je sache, c'est la première publication de Babel en français (précisons : dans une revue genevoise).

Dans les « Remarques » à la fin de la revue il écrit :

Ce qui frappe surtout en Babel, c'est sa langue riche en locutions populaires (dont la traduction ne peut naturellement donner qu'un pâle reflet), concise et expressive en même temps, c'est sa vision aiguë des êtres et des choses et ce don extraordinaire qu'il possède d'entrer pour ainsi dire dans la peau de ses personnages jusqu'à s'identifier complètement à eux.

Les deux récits que nous donnons et qui révèlent sous une forme très simple et familière l'esprit et les coutumes de l'armée rouge, font partie du cycle *Konarmia*, dont la traduction française va paraître prochainement chez Simon Kra, à Paris¹¹.

Boris Schloezer vise la « Collection de la *Revue européenne* » de Simon Kra qui publie des auteurs contemporains. Il me semble qu'il souhaite y faire paraître plusieurs œuvres, mais c'est finalement la Nouvelle Revue Française qui accepte sa collection « Les Jeunes Russes » (dont le titre renvoie à son article).

⁹ *Les Nouvelles littéraires, artistiques et scientifiques*, 1925, 17 juin, p. 6.

¹⁰ *Bibliothèque universelle et Revue de Genève*, 1925, novembre, p. 1851-1855, 1855-1859.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 1919.

En 1926, le roman de Boris Pilniak *L'Année nue* (réédité en 1930) ouvre cette collection, suivi par *Virineya* de Lydia Seifoullina (1927, réédité en 1930). Le prospectus prévoit la publication de récits de Babel (sans autre précision), mais ils n'y paraissent finalement pas, comme d'ailleurs ceux de Zamiatine, annoncés eux-aussi (son roman *Nous autres* y voit le jour en 1929). Seuls les récits de Mikhaïl Zochtchenko figurent dans la collection « Les Jeunes Russes » (*La Vie joyeuse*, 1931), sans doute, parce que le recueil qui porte ce titre a paru à Paris en 1926 en russe, aux éditions *Le Voyageur enchanté*. Dans les années 1930, la collection devient plus « soviétique » et publie *Les Défricheurs* (autre traduction : *Terres défrichées*) de Mikhaïl Cholokhov (1933). Cependant, dans cette traduction, la fin est abrégée : le roman se termine à la révolte des femmes.

Cavalerie rouge

La première édition russe de *Cavalerie rouge* en tant que livre voit le jour fin mai 1926. La revue *Europe*, fondée en 1923 par Romain Rolland et ses disciples, ouvre ses pages à Isaac Babel. En octobre 1926, paraissent trois nouvelles, traduites par des demoiselles Aschkenasy et Bouissounouse¹² : « Pan Apolek », « Le cimetière de Kosino », « La route de Brody »¹³. La traduction me semble trop recherchée : la beauté cache le tragique.

La presse communiste hésite. Fin septembre 1926, *L'Humanité* publie l'article de Karl Radek « Les déracinés de la poésie soviétique ». Il y critique les « compagnons de route » :

Les dernières œuvres de ces remarquables écrivains que sont Babel, Vsévolod Ivanov et Pilniak, ne sont pas seulement ennuyeuses pour les lecteurs avancés elles sont ennuyeuses aux auteurs eux-mêmes. Ceux-ci ont perdu la joie de créer, car ils se répètent au lieu d'aller de l'avant¹⁴.

Le comte Alexandre Alexandrovitch Saltykov (1872–1940), poète et philosophe, qui arrive à Paris après un séjour en Allemagne, publie le premier volume de sa collection *Les Écrivains russes d'après guerre*, intitulé *On s'en va* (Paris, Aetos. Librairie française et étrangère, s. d.). Dans une longue préface

¹² Janine Bouissounouse (1903–1978), future romancière, historienne et critique de cinéma.

¹³ *Europe*, 1926, 15 octobre, p. 129–138, 138–139, 139–141.

¹⁴ *L'Humanité*, 1926, 30 septembre, p. 4.

il affirme que l'émigration incarne la nation et que « la littérature russe, à quelques exceptions près, n'existe plus en Russie ». Il publie quatre nouvelles, dont deux ont été traduites en français avant lui, « L'Enfant » d'Ivanov et la « Lettre de soldat » de Babel, plus la « Ligne et couleur ». Les traductions de Babel sont faites en bon français. Cela passe pour « Ligne et couleur », mais détruit complètement l'oralité de « La Lettre ».

Enfin, c'est Maurice-Parijanine (Maurice Donzel, 1885–1937), traducteur confirmé, qui prend le relais des Mlles Aschkenasy et Bouissounouse. Entre 1907 et 1920, il vit en Russie, épouse la sœur de l'écrivain Boris Zaitsev, travaille pour l'Internationale Communiste. De retour en France, il traduit les œuvres de Bounine, Pilniak, Serafimovitch, Leonov, Boukharine, Trotski et d'autres. En avril 1928, la revue *Europe* publie dans sa traduction quatre nouvelles : « Le passage de Zbrouch », « Ghedali », « Le commissaire Konkine », « La mort de Dolgouchov »¹⁵. Comme Boris Schloëzer et le traducteur anonyme des *Écrivains russes d'après guerre*, il fournit des notes pour expliquer les néologismes, le « jargon de l'époque » (p. 498). Il cherche des équivalents pour les paroles fleuries du commissaire Konkine et avoue : « Le lecteur devine à quel point cette interprétation du texte est conventionnelle » (p. 507).

Le 12 avril 1928 à Paris, Maurice-Parijanine donne une conférence sur Babel, adressée aux adhérents du Groupement Universitaire des Amis de l'Union Soviétique¹⁶.

Nino Frank, écrivain et journaliste, publie le 12 mai 1928 dans *Les Nouvelles littéraires* un interview de l'écrivain pour le présenter au public et promouvoir *Cavalerie rouge*¹⁷.

Léon Bazalgette (1873–1928), écrivain, critique littéraire et traducteur, un des cofondateurs de la revue *Europe*, dirige la collection *Les prosateurs étrangers modernes* aux éditions Rieder (qui publient la revue *Europe*) et collabore avec *Clarté* et *L'Humanité*. Le 23 mai 1928, il présente *Cavalerie rouge* dans sa rubrique « Littératures étrangères »¹⁸. Il loue la version française qui « marquera une date dans l'histoire de la traduction comme l'œuvre elle-même dans la littérature de Russie soviétique », raconte la vie de Babel et résume quelques nouvelles. Fin mai, *L'Humanité* publie des « extraits du livre », en évitant de les appeler « nouvelles » et d'en donner les titres exacts (on vend

¹⁵ *Europe*, 1928, 15 avril, p. 496–498, 499–503, 503–507, 507–512.

¹⁶ *L'Humanité*, 1928, 12 avril, p. 4.

¹⁷ *Les Nouvelles littéraires, artistiques et scientifiques*, 1928, 12 mai, p. 4.

¹⁸ *L'Humanité*, 1928, 23 mai, p. 4.

mieux un roman). Je les indique : « Le Soir »¹⁹, « La Lettre »²⁰. Le livre paraît fin juin, le dépôt légal est effectué le 21 juillet 1928.

Maurice-Parijanine rédige une longue et belle préface, très personnelle. Il brosse un portrait vivant d'Isaac Babel qu'il fréquente à Paris où l'écrivain séjourne en 1927–1928. Il raconte avec maints détails la vie de l'auteur, y compris des aventures pittoresques de 1920 qui ne figurent ni dans *Cavalerie rouge*, ni dans le *Journal* de l'écrivain. Cette relation intime avec l'écrivain l'induit en erreur. Le traducteur se permet de comparer les qualités littéraires de Pilniak, Babel et Ehrenbourg (dont il avait fait la connaissance en Russie dix ans auparavant), de critiquer les « fautes de goût » de Babel, d'ajouter « Je lui reprocherais sa manière apprêtée, ses procédés : mais peut-être, ce n'est qu'un mauvais souvenir du mal qu'il m'a donné », et, surtout, de le traiter de haut : « Je sais qu'il va se dépouiller de ses derniers préjugés “littéraires” et qu'il grandira comme artiste, comme penseur, comme homme »²¹.

Maurice-Parijanine ne cache pas sa sympathie envers Léon Trotski qu'il loue sans arrêt. « Trotsky, homme d'État, organisateur admirable, le Carnot de cette révolution, il a droit de parler des artistes du verbe²²... » (*op. cit.*, p. 24). Il résume son ouvrage *Littérature et révolution* (1923) et choisit une formule élégante pour évoquer l'exil : « Mais, puisque, comme disait le camarade Virgile, “un dieu lui a octroyé des loisirs”, Trotsky aurait du mérite à trouver le temps de compléter cette grande étude » (*op. cit.*, p. 21). Et il ajoute : « Paradoxal, Babel déclare qu'il fait bon marché de toute littérature soviétique, à l'exception des œuvres de Trotsky et de Radek... Il rit quand il dit cela [...] »²³. Ces passages, publiés en 1928 et repris dans l'édition de 1930, auraient pu nuire gravement à l'écrivain, aussi bien qu'au traducteur.

La presse communiste n'est pas unanime. À la fin de l'année 1928, quand Babel avait déjà quitté la France, elle diffuse un article anonyme, consacré à la polémique entre Semion Boudionny et Maxime Gorki dans les pages de la *Pravda* en septembre-novembre 1928²⁴. Dans l'hebdomadaire communiste

¹⁹ *L'Humanité*, 1928, 26 mai, p. 2.

²⁰ *L'Humanité*, 1928, 28 mai, p. 4.

²¹ I. Babel, traduit du russe avec une introduction par Maurice-Parijanine, 3^e éd. Paris, Rieder, 1930, p. 25.

²² Un calque du russe « художники слова ».

²³ I. Babel, *Cavalerie rouge* ; p. 23.

²⁴ Voir : Юрий Парсамов, Давид Фельдман, « Грани скандала : цикл новелл И. Бабея “Конармия” в литературно-политическом контексте 1920–х годов », *Вопросы литературы* [Iouri Parsamov, David Feldman, « Au bord du scandale : le cycle de nouvelles *Cavalerie rouge*

Le Travailleur le gazetier déclare : « Il s'agit du livre très connu en Orient de Babel : *La cavalerie de Boudionny* (*sic* !). J'avoue ne l'avoir lu qu'à moitié. Il m'a vite déplu ». Ensuite, il traduit sans vergogne les injures émanant de Boudionny (ou de celui qui écrit à sa place) : « La fable de ces récits, qui sentent leur auteur érotomane, émane des fantaisies fiévreuses d'un juif au cerveau fêlé [...]».²⁵

Boris Schloëzer qui ne lit pas la presse communiste, à l'été 1929 dans son article « Coup d'œil sur la littérature au pays des Soviets » évoque brièvement le livre qu'il n'a pas pu publier lui-même :

Les récits de Babel (*Cavalerie rouge*), sont très courts, mais singulièrement chargés de substance. Ses sympathies pour la révolution (à laquelle il a pris une part active) n'ont jamais brouillé sa vue ; il voit clair. Maniant une langue pleine de locutions populaires, souvent brutale, toujours expressive et concise, il réussit à camper en quelques phrases des personnages qu'on n'oublie plus. Babel est peut-être le plus original des écrivains soviétiques²⁶.

En revanche, Vladimir Pozner y prête attention. En 1930, il publie dans la revue *Europe* un « Dialogue » ironique entre un écrivain français et son compère russe qui parlent de la littérature soviétique, dit que Babel est considéré comme un « compagnon de route » parce qu'il « ne s'est pas pénétré de l'idéologie communiste » et ajoute

On l'a même attaqué pour *Cavalerie Rouge*. Boudionny, qui avait commandé le corps dont les exploits furent décrits par Babel, a rédigé une lettre de protestation. Par contre, il a fait une préface pour un livre insignifiant d'un nommé Kroutikov

d'I. Babel dans le contexte littéraire et politique des années 1920 », *Questions littéraires*, 2011, n° 6, p. 229–286.

Les coauteurs identifient les vrais auteurs du pamphlet initial (A.N. Tarassov-Rodionov et S.N. Orlovski), inspiré par Kliment Vorochilov et signé par Semion Boudionny, publié dans la revue *Octobre* en 1924. Ils montrent les cibles cachées de ces attaques politiques, Léon Trotski et le journaliste Alexandre Voronski.

²⁵ « A propos du livre *Cavalerie Rouge* de Babel. Une attaque de cavalerie réussie de Boudionny », *Le Travailleur de l'Yonne – Côte d'or – Haute-Marne. Organe du Bloc Ouvrier et Paysan. Communiste, Syndicaliste, Coopératif*, 1928, 29 décembre, p. 4. Réed. : *La Dépêche de l'Aude et départements limitrophes. Quotidien communiste d'informations*, 1929 4 janvier, p. 3.

²⁶ Boris de Schloëzer, « Coup d'œil sur la littérature au pays des Soviets », *La Revue hebdomadaire*, t. 7, n° 30, 1929, 27 juillet, p. 424–425.

*Les Hommes à cheval*²⁷. Voici ce qu'il dit dans cette préface : « Nous voyons passer des lutteurs pour la liberté d'une bravoure inégalable, prêts à sacrifier, avec une ardeur combative, leur vie sur l'autel de la révolution, et non pas des sadiques, affamés de sang, tels que peignent ces mêmes héros des écrivains qui nous sont étrangers. » Ça, c'est pour Babel²⁸.

Revenons à Maurice-Parijanine. En 1928, banni de *L'Humanité*, il rejoint la revue *Les Humbles*, dirigée par Maurice Wullens, écrivain et anarchiste, auteur du récit de voyage *Paris-Moscou-Tiflis* (1927). En 1931, Maurice-Parijanine y publie ses traductions de trois nouvelles d'Isaac Babel : « Une femme laborieuse » (« Старательная женщина », 1928), « Coup d'œil au vasistas » (« В щелочку », 1917), « Celle du trottoir » (« Ходя », 1923)²⁹. Son sort est triste : quelques années plus tard, il perd son travail et meurt dans la misère.

Les nouvelles

Cavalerie rouge renforce la réputation de Babel en France. En mai 1929, la revue littéraire *Bifur*, dont Nino Frank est le secrétaire général, revue ambitieuse, chic, internationale (James Joyce, Gottfried Benn et Boris Pilniak figurent parmi les conseillers étrangers), offre dans son tout premier numéro *Trois contes* de Babel : « Lioubka la cosaque », « Chez notre petit père Makhno », « La ligne et la couleur »³⁰. Sous la même couverture paraissent les œuvres de Gottfried Benn, Blaise Cendrars, Henry Michaux, Philippe Soupault, Tristan Tzara et d'autres, y compris la traduction de *La Conjuration des égaux* d'Ilya Ehrenbourg.

Un autre récit de Babel, *Le Roi* (1921) paraît la même année 1929 dans la *Revue européenne*³¹ dans la traduction de Perikl Stavrovitch Stavrov (1895–1955) et de Victor Llona (1886–1953). Un Grec d'Odessa, poète et romancier arrivé à Paris en 1926, fait équipe avec un Péruvien, romancier et traducteur qui vit entre la France et les États-Unis et s'installe à Paris en 1920. Comme d'habitude, l'un fournit une traduction littérale et l'autre lui donne une forme littéraire.

²⁷ Dmitri Ivanovitch Kroutikov (1893–1932). Д. Крутиков, *Люди конные. Рассказы.* / С предисловием С.М. Буденного. М., Недра, 1928.

²⁸ *Europe*, n° 90, 1930, 15 juin, p. 297.

²⁹ Isaac Babel, « Trois histoires », *Les Humbles : revue littéraire mensuelle des Primaires*, 1931, mai, p. 1–4, 4–6, 6–8.

³⁰ Babel, « Trois contes », *Bifur*, 1929, n° 1, p. 51–57, 57–60, 60–63. Trad. par René Martel (1893–1976), romancier et journaliste.

³¹ Babel, « Le Roi », *Revue européenne*, 1929, vol. 5, p. 1776–1783

Le résultat est mitigé. Le style ironique de Babel paraît fade, le parler d'Odessa disparaît, comme sous la plume de René Martel.

En mars 1930, le magazine bruxellois *Variétés. Revue mensuelle illustrée de l'esprit contemporain*, créé par l'écrivain, éditeur et marchand d'art Paul-Gustave Van Hecke (1887–1967) et le surréaliste E.L.T. Mesens (1903–1971), musicien et écrivain, offre un numéro consacré à l'URSS, avec de belles et rarissimes photos. L'« Anthologie de jeunes écrivains russes » réunit des « traductions autorisées de M. Mirowitsch »³². J'ignore à qui le traducteur (ou la traductrice) avait demandé ces autorisations. La nouvelle d'Isaac Babel « Après le combat » ouvre l'« Anthologie »³³. Elle fait partie de *Cavalerie rouge* traduite par Parijanine ; la mention de l'édition française de 1928 figure dans la notice. La version de Mirowitsch se lit aisément, mais elle est loin d'être fidèle. Le traducteur « améliore » le texte qui lui semble étrange. Il le simplifie, le modifie à sa guise, supprime des phrases. On a l'impression qu'il réécrit la traduction de Parijanine. De la même façon, dans la notice consacrée à Babel, M.A. Mirowitsch reprend, avec des ajouts de son cru, des éléments de la préface de Parijanine et, sans doute, de l'*Anthologie* de Vladimir Pozner de 1929 (nous y reviendrons).

La même année André Pierre (1887–1966), journaliste socialiste, traducteur de Maxime Gorki et de Fédor Chaliapine, analyse la concurrence entre les maisons d'édition parisiennes qui publient la littérature soviétique (« Les traductions des écrivains russes modernes »³⁴).

La NRF : Boris Pilniak, *L'Année nue*, Lydia Seifoullina, *Virineya*, Vsevolod Ivanov, *Le train blindé 1469*, Alexandre Nevierov, *Tachkent, ville d'abondance* (« évocation de la grande famine de 1921 »), Valentin Kataev, *Rastratchiki* (« c'est-à-dire les "Concussionnaires" »), Eugène Zamiatine, *Nous autres* (« critique de la mécanisation de la vie humaine sous le régime communiste ») ; en attente : Constantin Fedine, *Les cités et les années*, Mikhaïl Zochthchenko.

Rieder : Isaac Babel, *Cavalerie rouge*, Alexis Tolstoï, *Le chemin des tourments*.

Payot : Mikhaïl Cholokhov, *Sur le Don paisible*, vol. 1

Éditions sociales internationales : Fédor Gladkov, *Le Ciment*, Alexandre Fadéïev, *La défaite*, Alexis Demidov, *Le Tourbillon*, Iouri Lebedinski, *La Semaine*, Alexandre Serafimovitch, *Le Torrent de fer*.

³² Plus tard, M.A. Mirowitsch crée avec Max Carghèse *Sesame. Hebdomadaire indépendant du cinéma* (Bruxelles, 1932–1933).

³³ *Variétés. Revue mensuelle illustrée de l'esprit contemporain* 1930, 15 mars. 2^e année, n° 11, p. 749–751.

³⁴ *Europe Nouvelle*, n° 657, 1930, 13 septembre, p. 1311–1312.

Sans oublier *Les Artamonov* de Gorki, traduit par Dumesnil de Gramont et les livres d'Ilia Ehrenbourg, *La ruelle de Moscou* et *10 C.V.*, « écrivain plus montparnassien que moscovite ».

Comme nous le voyons, la littérature soviétique a une très bonne côte en 1930.

Vladimir Pozner

Vladimir Pozner (1905–1992), poète et romancier, benjamin des Frères Sérépion, traducteur de Tolstoï, Dostoïevski, Rozanov et Chklovski, publie en 1929, deux livres qui lui procurent la réputation de fin connaisseur de la littérature soviétique : *Panorama de la littérature russe contemporaine*, préface de Paul Hazard (Paris, éditions Kra, 1929, collection « Panoramas des littératures contemporaines ») et *Anthologie de la prose russe contemporaine* (Paris, Émile Hazan, 1929). Dans le premier ouvrage, il consacre trois pages à l'œuvre d'Isaac Babel (p. 347–349) :

Babel a rompu avec la forme traditionnelle du roman encore plus résolument que ses camarades ; si ceux-là écrivent des récits de cinquante pages, Babel concentre un sujet en l'espace de cent lignes. Aussi est-il tenu à une précision d'horloger, il examine chaque mot au microscope et ne s'arrête que lorsqu'il a trouvé l'expression la plus succincte, la plus exacte et aussi la plus frappante. Il travaille beaucoup pour produire peu. [...]

Babel évite soigneusement les lieux communs, les expressions passe-partout ; n'importe quel passage de ses livres détaché du texte garde une physionomie bien distincte. Poète, Babel écrivait de stances. Du reste, ce prosateur qui n'a jamais composé un vers possède un métier de poète. [...]

Babel dissocie tous les mots accouplés par la tradition et les regroupe de façon à donner à chaque phrase de quoi satisfaire les cinq sens du lecteur, à moins qu'il ne se serve d'idiotismes avec une nuance d'ironie. [...] Chez Babel la métaphore ne supporte aucune approximation, elle sert à montrer un objet et à le magnifier en même temps.

En bon disciple de son maître Viktor Chklovski, Vladimir Pozner met en relief le contraste entre le style élevé (épique) et le sujet trivial (comique) :

Il se dégage de ces nouvelles de quelques pages un souffle épique. Babel, qui ne parle que de prostituées, de soldats et de bandits, les traite en personnalités exceptionnelles dont chaque geste a de l'importance. Ce sont pour lui des rois dont il se fait

l'historiographe. Il est volontairement pathétique, surtout dans la description des détails grossiers et quotidiens, il a une prédilection pour les points d'exclamation. L'acuité de l'œuvre s'intensifie grâce à la disproportion qu'il y a entre l'objet de la description et la manière de la décrire qui ne choque jamais. La puissance d'ironie qui est renfermée dans l'histoire du bandit Bénia Krik, héros des Récits d'Odessa ou dans celle du corps de Boudionny, ne fait que rendre les passages pathétiques plus frappants. L'attaque d'une banque à main armée semble être un épisode de la guerre de Troie ; les cavaliers rouges rappellent Roland et Oliver. Les descriptions les plus grossières respirent une triste et amère tendresse pour les « camarades qui vont souvent au front, mais en reviennent rarement », pour les vainqueurs et pour les vaincus, pour l'homme, unique comme l'est le mot et dont il faut comprendre toute l'importance pour avoir le droit d'en parler, de le glorifier et d'en rire³⁵.

Le second ouvrage offre la traduction de « L'histoire de mon pigeonnier » (p. 10–23) avec une brève présentation de l'écrivain (p. 9–10), où Pozner, en suivant l'« Autobiographie » de Babel, évoque son service à la Tchéka. Cela n'a rien d'anodin, vu le scandale qui eut lieu en février 1928 à Paris au café *La Rotonde* où l'écrivain Valentin Gorianski avait offensé ou même giflé Babel en criant « Tchékiste ! ».³⁶

Dans le long, fin et brillant article « Quelques aspects de la littérature russe depuis 1917 »³⁷, Pozner se défend des critiques de Maurice-Parajanine qui n'a pas apprécié le *Panorama de la littérature russe contemporaine*. Pozner présente avant tout de nouvelles tendances littéraires, que ce soit la prose des poètes (Pasternak, Mandelstam) ou la littérature prolétarienne, mentionne des traductions des auteurs russes aux éditions de la NRF. Dans ce vaste panorama Isaac Babel est à peine évoqué : « Babel fit paraître ses nouvelles qui, à l'instar de celles de Maupassant et de O. Henry, étaient des romans concentrés en deux pages »³⁸.

En 1932–1933, Isaac Babel séjourne à Paris, se lie d'amitié avec Pozner et lui communique ses nouvelles, publiées et inédites. Pozner en traduit quatre. Trois paraissent : « Ivan et Marie » (*Regards*, 1933, janvier), « La rue Dante »

³⁵ Vladimir Pozner, *Panorama de la littérature russe contemporaine*, préface de Paul Hazard, Paris, éditions Kra, 1929, p. 347–349.

³⁶ Елена Погорельская, Стив Левин, *Исаак Бабель. Жизнеописание* [Elena Pogorelskaïa, Stiv Levin, *Isaac Babel. Biographie*], Saint-Pétersbourg, Vita Nova, 2020, p. 268–270.

³⁷ Vladimir Pozner, « Quelques aspects de la littérature russe depuis 1917 », *La Revue de Paris*, 1930, 15 août, p. 816–839.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 837.

(*Germinal*, 1933, 29 avril) et « Dans la cave », *Le Cahier bleu* (n° 2, 1933, 22 octobre, p. 84–91). La quatrième, « Le pétrole », conçue et entamée en URSS et rédigée à Paris comme « La rue Dante », envoyée à l'été 1933 aux *Nouvelles littéraires*, ne voit pas le jour.

Face à la montée du nazisme en Allemagne, Vladimir Pozner, comme d'autres intellectuels, s'engage politiquement de manière forte. En 1932, la gauche européenne, soutenue et financée par l'URSS et l'Internationale Communiste, crée le Mouvement de lutte contre la guerre et le fascisme (Amsterdam-Pleyel). Vladimir Pozner adhère à l'Association des écrivains et artistes révolutionnaires (AEAR), section française de l'Union internationale des écrivains révolutionnaires, créée en 1932 par Léon Moussinac, Paul Vaillant-Couturier et Aragon. Il fait partie du comité de rédaction de la revue de l'AEAR, *Commune*, fondée à l'été 1933.

Les trois périodiques qui publient les traductions de Pozner des nouvelles de Babel sont de gauche. Le mensuel *Regards sur le monde du travail*, créé à Berlin en 1932 par le Secours ouvrier international (sous l'égide de Willi Münzenberg), est repris à Paris sous le titre *Regards* et dirigé par Léon Moussinac (1890–1964), écrivain et critique de cinéma communiste. En 1934, le Comité directeur de la revue comprend André Gide, Romain Rolland, Henri Barbusse, Maxime Gorki, Charles Vildrac, André Malraux, Eugène Dabit, Isaac Babel, Vladimir Pozner. Cette année 1934, la revue mentionne Isaac Babel à plusieurs reprises. Le journal *Germinal* se positionne comme libertaire, c'est-à-dire anarchiste. La revue bimensuelle *Le Cahier bleu : bilans et plans sociaux*, créée en 1933, publie dans son premier numéro Heinrich Mann et Karl Radek, et dans le second, Isaac Babel.

A la fin de l'année 1933, Vladimir Pozner adhère au Parti communiste français. A l'été 1934 à Moscou, il assiste au premier Congrès des écrivains soviétiques.

Les agences littéraires

En tant que représentant de l'Agence littéraire, créée à Moscou par Mikhaïl Koltsov, Vladimir Pozner doit surveiller les publications des auteurs soviétiques en France. Cependant, ce sont les maisons d'édition qui lancent des collections et choisissent les œuvres. Sans oublier les Éditions Sociales Internationales qui appartiennent au Parti communiste français et sont financées par l'Internationale Communiste. Les traductions du russe vers le français sont faites à Moscou. Léon Moussinac les gère ; à partir de 1935, il dirigera cette maison d'édition.

Néanmoins, une autre agence littéraire entre dans l'arène : le *Bureau Littéraire Européen*, fondé en 1932 par Marc Slonim (Odessa, 1894–1976)³⁹, socialiste-révolutionnaire, écrivain et critique littéraire, et George Reavey (Vitebsk, 1907–1976), poète-surréaliste irlandais et traducteur. Émigré à Prague, Marc Slonim y édite avec Vassili Soukhomline (1885–1963), la revue *Volia Rossii* (*Воля России*, 1922–1932). La revue parle d'Isaac Babel à plusieurs reprises. En 1925, dans son aperçu des nouvelles parutions, Marc Slonim consacre deux pages à son recueil de nouvelles⁴⁰. Il avoue qu'il n'apprécie pas trop les récits d'Odessa, loue la *Cavalerie rouge* qui, contrairement aux œuvres d'autres écrivains, ne glorifie pas la bestialité. Le style soi-disant neutre souligne l'absurdité des événements. Slonim analyse et défend deux récits de Babel, « La ligne et la couleur » et « Le péché de Jésus », dénigrés par le quotidien parisien *Dni* (*Дни*), dirigé par des socialistes-révolutionnaires russes émigrés, proches d'Alexandre Kerenski⁴¹. Rappelons, que la première nouvelle brosse un portrait philosophique de Kerenski.

En 1926, Nadejda Melnikova-Papouškova (Saint-Pétersbourg, 1891 – Prague, 1978) offre dans la revue *Volia Rossii* une belle étude littéraire de la *Cavalerie rouge*⁴². L'année suivante, Marc Slonim y propose une interprétation politique et philosophique du roman dans son aperçu de la littérature russe après la révolution, « Dix ans de littérature russe » (1927)⁴³, puis dans son article entièrement consacré à Isaac Babel et la *Cavalerie rouge*⁴⁴. Selon lui, Babel montre que la révolution et la guerre engendrent la cruauté et la barbarie, considérées comme norme. Elles révoltent et fascinent le narrateur, un intellectuel juif qui

³⁹ Michel Aucouturier, « La critique de l'émigration et la littérature soviétique : Mark Slonim et *Volja Rossii* », *Revue des études slaves*, vol. 71, part. 2, 1999, p. 377–389 ; Алексей Зверев, « Воля России », *Литературная энциклопедия русского зарубежья (1918–1940)*, т. 2 ч. 1, Москва, ИНИОН РАН, 1996, с. 135–152 ; Стефано Гардзонио, « Слоним многоликий », *Знамя*, 2017, n° 9.

⁴⁰ Марк Слоним, « Среди книг и журналов. По новым книгам », *Воля России* [Marc Slonim, « Parmi les livres et les revues. Des nouveaux livres », *Volia Rossii*], 1925, n° 12 (sur Babel, p. 54–56).

⁴¹ Ивелич [Нина Берберова], « Литературная жизнь в России », *Дни* [Ivelitch [Nina Berberova], « La vie littéraire en Russie », *Dni*, 1925, 25 octobre, p. 3.

⁴² Надежда Мельникова-Папоушек, « Конармия », *Воля России* [Nadejda Melnikova-Papouškova, « Cavalerie rouge », *Volia Rossii*], 1926 n° 8–9, p. 234–236.

⁴³ Марк Слоним, « Десять лет русской литературы », *Воля России*, [Marc Slonim, « Dix ans de littérature russe », *Volia Rossii*], 1927, n° 10, 11–12 (sur Babel, n° 11–12, p. 105–106).

⁴⁴ Марк Слоним, « И. Бабель », *Воля России* [Marc Slonim, « I. Babel », *Volia Rossii*], 1928, n°1, p. 106–117.

ne possède pas le plus simple des dons, le don de tuer. Slonim réédite cet article dans son ouvrage *Portraits des écrivains soviétiques*, publié à Paris en 1933⁴⁵.

Depuis 1927, Slonim vit entre Prague et Paris, où il s'installe définitivement en 1932. Comme nous l'avons déjà dit, il crée cette année une agence littéraire qui vise les auteurs anglophones et russophones. Son partenaire et coauteur George Reavey lance à Paris une maison d'édition *Europa Press* qui débute bien. Slonim et Reavey éditent ensemble une anthologie de la littérature soviétique en anglais, publiée à Londres et ensuite à New York⁴⁶ dans laquelle ils insèrent les récits de Babel « The End of St Ipaty », « The Awakening » (« La fin du monastère St Hypace », « Le Réveil »). Marcel Brion, romancier et critique littéraire, loue l'édition anglaise qui inclut à la fois des auteurs soviétiques et d'autres qui n'entrent pas dans cette catégorie, comme Remizov et Biély⁴⁷. Ensuite, paraît une version italienne⁴⁸.

En 1935, la version française de l'*Anthologie*, modifiée et mise à jour, sort aux éditions NRF Gallimard⁴⁹. Sur la quatrième de couverture figure le catalogue de la collection *Les Jeunes Russes* de la NRF. L'*Anthologie* fait de la publicité à la NRF et renforce sa politique éditoriale. En même temps, elle forge la réputation des coauteurs en tant que traducteurs, critiques et agents littéraires internationaux, actifs en Grande-Bretagne, États-Unis, Italie et France. L'ouvrage voit le jour en été (achevé d'imprimer le 30 juin 1935). Du 21 au 25 juin 1935 à Paris, se tient le Congrès international des écrivains pour la défense de la culture auquel, entre autres, participe Babel. J'ignore s'il a reçu un exemplaire du livre. Deux éléments auraient pu alarmer les écrivains arrivés au Congrès, et irriter les autorités soviétiques.

A la fin de sa préface, Slonim oppose deux courants littéraires : les auteurs qui suivent la doctrine du matérialisme dialectique et ceux qui défendent l'individualité humaine, comme Pasternak, Leonov, Olecha. L'œuvre de ces derniers serait une survivance du passé, condamnée à disparaître, ou, au contraire, un reflet des « courants souterrains de l'esprit populaire » destinés, tôt ou tard, à se manifester et à se concrétiser. Il conclut :

⁴⁵ Марк Слоним, *Портреты советских писателей*. Paris: Parabola, 1933, p. 135–148.

⁴⁶ *Soviet literature: An anthology*, ed. and transl. by G. Reavey & M. Slonim. London, Wishart, [1933]; New York, Covici, Friede, 1934.

⁴⁷ Marcel Brion, « L'actualité littéraire à l'étranger », *L'Intransigeant*, 1934, 5 février, p. 4.

⁴⁸ *Scrittori sovietici. Raccolta antologica di prose scelte*, a cura di G. Reavey, M. Slonim, T.A. Spagnol, G. Prampolini, Milano, A. Mondadori, 1935.

⁴⁹ *Anthologie de la littérature soviétique. 1918–1934*, éd. Marc Slonim, George Reavey, Paris, NRF Gallimard, 1935.

Ainsi la lutte des tendances dans la littérature de l'U.R.S.S. assume un caractère presque prophétique, et son étude devient extrêmement importante, sinon nécessaire, pour bien comprendre le drame universel dans lequel se débat le monde moderne⁵⁰.

En outre, l'*Anthologie* contient un extrait de l'article de Léon Trotski « La culture et le socialisme » (1927)⁵¹. En juin, 1935, Trotski expulsé, a quitté la France où il avait passé trois ans.

Slonim écrit dans son introduction « La littérature soviétique » :

Isaac Babel, un des plus remarquables prosateurs de l'U.R.S.S., en est un exemple frappant. A première vue, on serait tenté de classer ses nouvelles parmi les descriptions réalistes de la guerre civile. [...]

Le rêve et la tendresse font ainsi leur entrée dans ce monde de misère, la lyrique souligne la tragédie de la mort, et les cauchemars guerriers aiguïssent le désir de pureté et de spiritualité. Le procédé préféré de Babel est ce jeu d'ombre et de lumière, cet alliage romantique de contrastes, cette évocation de la bestialité humaine suivie de l'image héroïque du sacrifice et de l'enthousiasme⁵².

Les coéditeurs choisissent deux récits de Babel, « Le Réveil » qui figurait dans la version anglaise et « La Veuve » qui n'y était pas. Marc Slonim et Suzanne Campaux⁵³ traduisent le premier⁵⁴, ainsi que la majeure partie des œuvres en prose, y compris les récits de Vsevolod Ivanov (une nouvelle traduction de *L'Enfant*, devenue *Bébé*) et d'autres.

Vassili Soukhomline traduit « La Veuve »⁵⁵ qui fait partie de *Cavalerie rouge* et a été déjà traduite par Maurice-Parijanine. Il offre un beau texte, en gardant le contraste entre le parler de Levka (qu'il rend en utilisant l'argot) et les métaphores du narrateur.

En 1936 George Reavey place ses nouvelles traductions de Babel dans la revue des surréalistes anglais *Contemporary Poetry and Prose*. La première,

⁵⁰ *Anthologie de la littérature soviétique*, p. 46.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 308-309.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 34-35.

⁵³ En collaboration avec Vassili Soukhomline elle a traduit *La guerre civile* de Veressaïev (1929) et seule *Sur le Don paisible* de Cholokhov (1930). Elle traduit aussi des auteurs anglophones.

⁵⁴ *Anthologie de la littérature soviétique*, p. 133-139.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 111-115.

« In the Basement » (« Dans la cave ») paraît dans le n° 3 (juillet 1936)⁵⁶. La seconde, « With Our Father Makhno » (« Avec notre père Makhno ») aurait dû ouvrir le n° 8 (décembre 1936). Or, comme l'indique Efraim Sicher dans sa bibliographie des œuvres de Babel, les éditeurs n'ayant pas reçu l'autorisation demandée, laissent les pages en blanc en guise de protestation⁵⁷.

On peut supposer que ce sont les autorités soviétiques qui n'autorisent pas la publication pour des raisons politiques. Dans ces années-là, elles contrôlent les éditions effectuées à l'étranger et multiplient les traductions faites en URSS.

Littérature internationale

Entre 1932 et 1937, la revue *Littérature internationale*, organe de l'Union internationale des écrivains révolutionnaires, éditée à Moscou en plusieurs langues, publie les œuvres de Babel en anglais, en allemand et en français⁵⁸. Dans la version française de la revue, cinq nouvelles de Babel paraissent en 1935 : dans le n° 2 « Contes de la ville d'Odessa : "Comment ça se passait à Odessa" (p. 42–47), "Le Roi" » (p. 47–51), dans le n° 4 « L'Éveil » (p. 28–32), dans le n° 6 « Guy de Maupassant » (p. 33–37), « Le pétrole » (p. 38–41). Elles sont toutes traduites par « B. Boleslavskaïa et Jeanne Moussinac ».

Boleslava (Bolja) Samouilovna Voulfson (pseudonyme Boleslavskaïa, 1899–1941) travaille comme secrétaire de Mikhaïl Koltsov au bureau des Relations internationales de la Société des écrivains soviétiques. En tant qu'interprète, elle accompagne André Malraux lors de ses voyages en URSS en 1934 et 1936. Ensuite, Malraux et Boleslavskaïa se croisent en Espagne où Koltsov est envoyé en mission⁵⁹. Koltsov est arrêté en 1938 et fusillé en 1940. Boleslavskaïa est arrêtée en 1940 et fusillée en 1941. Jeanne, née Lods, musicienne et artiste peintre, épouse Léon Moussinac en 1916 ; elle décède vers 1981. Sans doute relit-elle et corrige-t-elle la première version faite par Boleslavskaïa. J'ignore si en 1935 les traductrices avaient la possibilité de travailler ensemble (à Moscou ? à

⁵⁶ Durant le dégel, George Reavey réédite cette nouvelle dans deux recueils qu'il a préparés : *14 Great Stories by Russian Authors* (New York, 1959), *Modern Soviet Short Stories* (New York, 1961).

⁵⁷ Efraim Sicher, *Checklist of the Works of Isaak Babel (1894–1940)*, op. cit.

⁵⁸ Voir : Анастасия Филонова, « Переводы рассказов Исаака Бабеля в журнале "Интернациональная литература" », *Новый филологический вестник* [Anastasia Filonova, « Les traductions des récits de Babel dans la revue *Littérature internationale* », *Novyj filologičeskij vestnik*], 2022, n° 1(60), p. 200–211.

⁵⁹ Евгений Кушкин, « Андре Мальро. Последняя встреча с Россией », *Звезда* [Evgueni Kouchkine, « André Malraux. Dernière rencontre avec la Russie », *Zvezda*], 2020, n° 8, p. 196–205 ; URL : <https://zvezdaspb.ru/index.php?page=8&nput=3852>

Paris où Boleslavskaiï aurait pu se rendre à l'été 1935 pour accompagner Mikhaïl Koltsov ?), à moins qu'elles n'aient utilisé la poste (ce qui expliquerait quelques lacunes ou maladresses).

Les traductions du récit de Babel « Пробуждение » faites par Boleslavskaiï-Moussinac (« L'Éveil ») et par Slonim-Campaux (« Le Réveil ») paraissent en même temps. Mis à part le titre, elles sont assez semblables. Le même style, les mêmes tournures. Le produit d'une écriture à quatre mains.

En revanche, la traduction de la nouvelle « Le pétrole » diffère complètement de celle de Vladimir Pozner, restée inédite (j'ai consulté le tapuscrit, conservé aux archives). Les textes-sources ne sont pas les mêmes. Pozner reçoit en 1933 le texte des mains de l'auteur. Boleslavskaiï-Moussinac ont recours au texte imprimé et censuré. Le 14 février 1934, la nouvelle est publiée dans le journal *Vetcherniaïa Moskva* où quelques phrases sont éliminées ; ensuite, la même année, elle paraît dans le recueil des récits de Babel, avec des suppressions supplémentaires. Les deux traductions offrent deux œuvres différentes.

La fin

Le 1^{er} mars 1937, la revue de l'AEAR *Commune. Revue littéraire française pour la défense de la culture* (n° 43), dirigée par Aragon, publie les articles des écrivains français et soviétiques consacrés au « Procès de Moscou », celui de Gueorgui Piatakov (bonne connaissance de Babel), Karl Radek, Grigori Sokolnikov (une autre connaissance de Babel) et d'autres. Le texte de Babel « Mensonge, trahison, smerdiakovchtchina » y figure bel et bien (p. 815 ; le nom du traducteur n'est pas indiqué). Dans la notice « Nos collaborateurs » la revue indique : « Babel n'a pas à être présenté en France où il a été abondamment traduit » (p. 774).

Dans le numéro n° 51 de la *Commune* (1937, novembre, p. 291-296) paraît « Le Baiser » de Babel, traduit par Joseph (Iossif Efimovitch) Pouterman (Kichinev, 1890 – Meudon, 1940), fonctionnaire de la mission commerciale soviétique à Paris, traducteur des œuvres d'Ehrenbourg (1935-1936) et de Pouchkine (1937), ami de Boris Schloëzer, bonne connaissance de Léon Chestov et de Marina Tsvetaïeva. La traduction est tout à fait correcte, mais un peu terne à mon goût. Elle est rééditée en octobre 1944 à Genève dans le recueil *Domaine russe, textes de la littérature soviétique*, [...] choisis et présentés par Maurice Ducommun, secrétaire romand de l'Association Suisse – URSS (Genève – Paris, Éditions des Trois collines, 1944). Il semble que Maurice Ducommun ignore la

fin tragique de Babel, arrêté en 1939 et fusillé en 1940 ; en tout cas, il ne les mentionne pas.

Les œuvres novatrices d'Isaac Babel ne correspondent pas aux doctrines prônées par l'Union internationale des écrivains révolutionnaires et, ensuite, par le premier congrès des écrivains soviétiques qui en 1934 proclame une seule bonne méthode, le réalisme socialiste. Les procès politiques des années 1930 et l'extermination des têtes pensantes du Parti Communiste vont de pair avec la censure et les arrestations des écrivains, artistes, metteurs en scène... Boris Pilniak, Isaac Babel et d'autres en font partie.

Les autorités soviétiques présentent Moscou comme centre de la littérature communiste. Ce n'est pas faux. Toutefois, cette production soviétique se retrouve à la périphérie du processus littéraire mondiale.

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“BINDING BY SYNCHRONY”:
COGNITIVE PATTERN RECOGNITION
AND NARRATIVE SYNCHRONIZATION
IN NABOKOV’S *PALE FIRE*

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Abstract: This paper explores the role of synchrony as a central narrative device in Vladimir Nabokov’s *Pale Fire*, revealing how temporal alignments transcend mere coincidence to serve complex thematic and ideological functions. Focusing on the intertwined narratives of John Shade and Charles Kinbote, the study examines how Shade’s grief over his daughter Hazel’s suicide is expressed through the alignment of personal tragedy with banal televised broadcasts, transforming simultaneity into a poetic and cognitive mechanism for processing loss. In contrast, Kinbote strategically manipulates synchrony to impose his self-mythologizing agenda, fabricating connections between Shade’s poem and Gradus’s violent journey to assert narrative control and distort reality. The paper argues that these contrasting uses of synchrony reflect broader formal and philosophical concerns in the novel, highlighting the instability of temporal perception and the subjective nature of narrative construction. By situating synchrony as both a structural principle and a metanarrative strategy, this analysis bridges literary theory and cognitive psychology, illuminating Nabokov’s intricate interplay of narrative layers and the interpretive demands placed on readers. *Pale Fire* dramatizes the human impulse to find coherence amid chaos through cognitive pattern recognition, raising profound questions about authorship, authority, and the quest for meaning in simultaneity.

Keywords: Vladimir Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, Synchrony, Emplotment, Cognitive Pattern Recognition

Pale Fire stands as one of Nabokov’s most intricately crafted works, celebrated for its complex structure and interwoven narratives¹. The novel comprises a

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¹ Vladimir Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, New York, Vintage International, 1989.

foreword by Charles Kinbote, a lengthy poem titled “Pale Fire” by the poet John Shade, and Kinbote’s extensive commentary and index. While *Pale Fire* is frequently interpreted as a satire of literary criticism or academic pretension, less attention has been given to Nabokov’s creative deployment of synchrony. In this novel, synchrony functions not simply as temporal coincidence but as a deliberate narrative and cognitive framework that reflects the psychological states of the characters and the novel’s metafictional ambitions. It presents multiple instances where disparate events are aligned not through causality or chronology, but by subjective association. This synchronization—often orchestrated by the narrators themselves—becomes a mode of meaning-making rooted in pattern recognition, whereby psychological necessity shapes narrative form. Both Shade and Kinbote engage in synchronizing events across different temporal and ontological planes, constructing coherence from apparent randomness and asserting agency over otherwise uncontrollable realities.

This paper examines how Shade and Kinbote utilize synchrony to generate meaning within their respective narratives. Shade’s use of synchrony reflects his grief over his daughter Hazel’s suicide, aligning televised broadcasts with the tragic event to convey both personal anguish and a critique of commercial banality. Kinbote mirrors this technique by synchronizing Shade’s poetic creation with Gradus’s approach, forging connections between the poem and the fictional realm of Zembla. In *Pale Fire*, synchrony transcends mere temporal coincidence to become a subjective construction—a deliberate juxtaposition of unrelated events that serves specific narrative purposes. This study highlights how such narrative patterns illuminate Nabokov’s artistic vision and reveal the cognitive processes involved in constructing reality. Ultimately, this analysis deepens our understanding of the interplay between literary narrative, interpretation, and human cognition.

Synchrony and Neuroscience: Binding-by-Synchrony Hypothesis

The notion of synchrony—understood as the experiential or cognitively constructed simultaneity of events—has attracted growing interdisciplinary interest, spanning fields such as cognitive psychology, neuroscience, narratology, and literary criticism. While traditionally linked to the simple coexistence of events in time, synchrony within narrative frameworks operates with greater complexity. It serves not just as a temporal overlap but as a mental and interpretive mechanism that allows both narrators and readers to impose order

and coherence on disjointed or non-linear sequences. In this sense, synchrony enables what cognitive science describes as “binding-by-synchrony”: the mental synthesis of diverse stimuli or information into coherent, meaningful configurations.

According to the Cambridge Dictionary, synchrony refers to the coordination of events or activities to occur simultaneously². Synchronization specifically involves aligning multiple processes to function together harmoniously, with systems operating under such coordination described as synchronous or “in sync”. In contrast, juxtaposition entails placing two elements side by side to highlight differences or produce a particular effect.³ Within neuroscience, synchrony—particularly synchronous neural oscillations—is considered a promising solution to the binding problem, which addresses how brain circuits integrate diverse inputs related to decisions, actions, and perceptions. This synchronization enables the brain to fuse distinct features, objects, and backgrounds into a unified perceptual experience⁴. The binding problem comprises multiple layers, including questions about general neural coordination, the subjective coherence of perceptual experience, and the complex issue of variable binding⁵. Together, these aspects underscore the intricate challenges of understanding how disparate neural signals are unified. Crucially, synchrony is not merely a temporal phenomenon but is deeply embedded in the mechanics of perception. The concept of binding-by-synchrony (BBS) pertains to the temporal correlation of neural firings and the stimulus-driven synchronization of neuronal activity⁶. Peter Milner’s hypothesis of BBS posits that distinct features of an object are bound through synchronized activity across cortical neurons,⁷ offering valuable insight into how synchrony contributes to perception, recognition, and the formation of patterns.

² “Synchrony”, Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary & Thesaurus, Cambridge. Cambridge University Press, 2020, URL: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/culture>.

³ “Juxtaposition”, *Wikipedia*, January 3, 2023, URL: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Juxtaposition>.

⁴ Antti Revonsuo, James Newman, “Binding and Consciousness”, *Consciousness and Cognition* 8(2), 1999, p. 123–127.

⁵ Jerome Feldman, “The Neural Binding Problem”, *Cognitive Neurodynamics* 7(1), 2013, p. 1–11.

⁶ Andreas K. Engel et al., “Stimulus-dependent Neuronal Oscillations in Cat Visual Cortex: Inter-columnar Interaction as Determined by Cross-correlation Analysis”, *European Journal of Neuroscience* 2(7), 1990, p. 588–606.

⁷ Peter M. Milner, “A Model for Visual Shape Recognition”, *Psychological Review* 81(6), 1974, p. 521.

The Binding-by-Synchrony model has attracted considerable interest in cognitive science due to its implications for understanding neural integration. According to this theory, when the brain encounters a stimulus, neurons located in different cortical areas temporarily synchronize their firing⁸. This momentary coordination facilitates the integration of information from disparate brain regions engaged in processing various aspects of the stimulus. Christoph von der Malsburg identified the issue of feature binding—how the brain merges attributes like color, motion, and shape into a single perceptual entity—as a challenge that cannot be fully explained by individual neuronal firing rates⁹. The difficulty lies in the spatial separation of neurons responsible for distinct features, necessitating a mechanism for unified perception. In contrast, Vincent Di Lollo challenged the necessity of synchrony by proposing that modular coding—in which clusters of neurons encode multiple object features collectively—could resolve the binding problem¹⁰. His findings suggest that these neural modules are capable of representing several features simultaneously, offering an alternative explanation for how the brain achieves perceptual coherence without relying solely on synchrony.

Extensive research has highlighted the importance of rhythmic synchronous neuronal firing, particularly within the gamma frequency range (approximately 40–60 hertz)¹¹. Neurons frequently fire in synchrony with one another, a phenomenon believed to facilitate both information processing and communication across distinct brain regions. This coordinated activity allows the brain to identify and integrate signals from spatially dispersed neurons that respond to the same stimulus, enabling their joint processing and encoding relational information over time¹². Neural oscillations—regular, rhythmic fluctuations in the brain’s electrical activity—are central to this mechanism and are implicated in a range of cognitive functions, including timing, somatosensory

⁸ Miguel Romera, et al., “Binding Events Through the Mutual Synchronization of Spintronic Nano-neurons”, *Nature Communications* 13 (1), 2022, p. 883.

⁹ Christoph Von Der Malsburg, “The Correlation Theory of Brain Function” in Domany, E., van Hemmen, J.L., Schulten, K. (eds.) *Models of Neural Networks. Physics of Neural Networks*, New York, Springer New York, 1994, p. 95–119.

¹⁰ Vincent Di Lollo, “The Feature-binding Problem is an Ill-posed Problem”, *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 16(6), 2012, p. 317–321.

¹¹ Andreas K. Engel, *op. cit.*, p. 588.

¹² Christoph Von der Malsburg, “The what and why of binding: the modeler’s perspective”, *Neuron* 24(1), 1999, p. 95–104.

perception, attention, and memory¹³. Within the framework of the BBS theory, such oscillations are crucial for orchestrating the activity of distributed neural populations and fusing multiple object features into a cohesive perceptual whole. Synchronization, in this sense, shares affinities with parallel structure: both involve simultaneous activity in alignment. However, unlike parallelism, which implies uniform separation and direction, synchrony accommodates the potential for convergence, suggesting that entities or trajectories may intersect within a synchronized temporal frame.

These insights reveal synchrony in *Pale Fire* as a complex, multifaceted construct—operating simultaneously as a narrative technique, a cognitive mechanism, and a philosophical inquiry. Rather than merely connecting events, synchrony functions to highlight the friction between structure and arbitrariness, between interpretive coherence and disorder. Through his deliberate orchestration of synchrony, Nabokov engages in both formal innovation and a deeper exploration of knowledge and perception, prompting readers to critically examine the processes through which meaning is constructed.

The Enigma of Pale Fire: Poetics and Perspective

Pale Fire functions as a metafictional satire of academic exegesis, presented in a four-part format. The poem “Pale Fire” is attributed to fictional poet John Shade, while the accompanying foreword, extensive commentary, and index are authored by Charles Kinbote. Scholars commonly identify two narrative voices within the text: Shade as the poetic voice and Kinbote as the commentator. Brian Boyd initially posits that Shade serves as the sole narrator but later amends his theory, acknowledging the presence of both Shade and Kinbote as narrating entities¹⁴. In the poem, Shade reflects on deeply personal episodes from his life—his early childhood, his joyful relationship with his wife Sybil, the devastating suicide of their daughter Hazel, and his philosophical ruminations on existence and the afterlife. In stark contrast, Kinbote’s commentary becomes a vehicle for elaborating his delusional identity as the exiled ruler of Zembla. Echoing and distorting Shade’s meditations, Kinbote recounts an imaginary royal biography, including his aristocratic upbringing, political anxieties over

¹³ Ehud Ahissar, Miriam Zacksenhouse, “Temporal and Spatial Coding in the Rat Vibrissal System”, *Progress in Brain Research*, Volume 130, 2001, p. 75–87.

¹⁴ Brian Boyd, *Nabokov’s Pale Fire: The Magic of Artistic Discovery*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1999, p. 4.

an insurrection, tensions with the queen, and an obsessive preoccupation with homosexuality. Through his annotations, Kinbote attempts to co-opt the poem into his own fantasy, aligning its content with the narrative of Gradus, an assassin allegedly sent from Zembla to kill him. The story reaches a tragic climax when Gradus, mistaking Shade for Kinbote, fatally shoots the poet just after he finishes writing line 999. Believing Kinbote had tried to protect her husband, Sybil permits him to compile and publish the poem together with his commentary.

Pale Fire has sparked significant critical debate, particularly concerning the interpretive approaches it demands of its readers. Some scholars argue that the novel's intricate architecture and shifting tonal registers pose considerable challenges. Frank Kermode, for example, refers to *Pale Fire* as "one of the most complex novels ever written"¹⁵. Peter Rabinowitz takes this further, labeling the novel as not only "frustrating" but potentially "impossible" to read, given the exponential proliferation of interpretive possibilities¹⁶. Wayne Booth similarly observes that Nabokov, acting as a deliberately "elusive" author, cloaks his intentions behind layers of fictional artifice, thereby complicating the reader's task. Yet this complexity is not meant to deter engagement¹⁷. Rather, Nabokov encourages a perceptive and active readership, capable of navigating the novel's manifold perspectives. Aligning with Brian Boyd's interpretation, I argue that the text's intricacy serves not as a barrier but as an invitation to a deeper, more rewarding interpretive experience. Boyd contends that by attentively tracing the narrative cues, readers are led to successive revelations that unfold across multiple levels of meaning. He also emphasizes that *Pale Fire* serves as a literary experiment in narrative form, through which Nabokov investigates essential human themes—ranging from mortality, mental stability, and existential isolation to moral ambiguity, artistic creation, and parasitism¹⁸. To fully grasp the richness of the novel, one must adopt a layered, reflective reading practice that brings to light Nabokov's fusion of ethical inquiry, aesthetic innovation, and metaphysical exploration.

¹⁵ Frank Kermode, "Zemblances", *New Statesman* 9, 1962, p. 671–672.

¹⁶ Rabinowitz Peter, "Truth in Fiction: A Reexamination of Audiences", *Critical Inquiry*, 4(1), 1977, p. 121–141.

¹⁷ Wayne Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1988, p. 149.

¹⁸ Brian Boyd, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

Although debates persist regarding the novel’s readability, many scholars continue to celebrate *Pale Fire* for its exceptional postmodern qualities, narrative complexity, and openness to diverse interpretations. Mary McCarthy famously praised the novel as a landmark of twentieth-century fiction, likening it to “a Jack-in-the-box, a Fabergé gem, a clockwork toy, a chess problem, an infernal machine, a trap to catch reviewers, a cat-and-mouse game, a do-it-yourself kit,” ultimately calling it “a creature of perfect beauty, symmetry, strangeness, originality, and moral truth”¹⁹. Similarly, John Burt Foster regards *Pale Fire* as a definitive work of postmodern literature, while Matei Calinescu argues that its resonance extends far beyond its American roots, achieving global literary significance²⁰. Martin Amis emphasizes Nabokov’s mastery in crafting an engaging narrative, complete with fully realized characters, a compelling plot, and prose that is both vivid and laced with wit²¹. While critical attention has largely focused on the novel’s satirical engagement with literary scholarship and its embrace of postmodern uncertainty, comparatively little has been said about Nabokov’s sophisticated use of synchrony as a structural and thematic device.

This article examines how *Pale Fire* utilizes synchrony as a deliberate narrative technique, orchestrated through the interlaced perspectives of Shade and Kinbote, to probe the processes through which meaning is generated, interpreted, and imposed. Shade’s use of synchrony is most striking in his association of insignificant television programming with the devastating moment of his daughter Hazel’s suicide. This alignment serves a dual purpose: it externalizes his mourning while simultaneously satirizing the triviality of mass media, whose superficial content starkly contrasts with profound personal loss, amplifying the absurdity of emotional resonance in modern culture. Kinbote adopts a parallel strategy by aligning the origin of Shade’s poetic inspiration with Gradus’s approach to New Wye, thereby retrospectively constructing a narrative that links the creative act to Zembla’s imagined political upheaval. In *Pale Fire*, synchrony transcends simple coincidence—it reflects a deeper interpretive impulse, a mental process of pattern-making that allows both characters and readers to draw connections across disjointed events and contexts. These layered temporal alignments underscore the novel’s exploration of the relationship

¹⁹ Mary McCarthy, “A Bolt from the Blue”, *The New Republic*, 11(3), 1962, p. 21–27.

²⁰ John Burt Foster, *Nabokov’s Art of Memory and European Modernism*, Princeton University Press, 1993, p. 231.

²¹ Martin Amis, “The Sublime and the Ridiculous: Nabokov’s Black Farces” in *Vladimir Nabokov: A Tribute*, Peter Quennell (ed.), London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1979, p. 73–87.

between subjective time and narrative form. Ultimately, *Pale Fire* serves as a metafictional inquiry into how the human mind imposes coherence through simultaneity, forging causality, meaning, and even fate out of randomness. By highlighting the artificial nature of these synchronous moments, Nabokov exposes the epistemological fragility of narrative and invites reflection on how interpretive structures influence our perception of reality.

Synchrony and Narrative: Emplotment and Discordant Concordance

In literary narratives, synchrony functions as a mechanism for detecting patterns, enabling the alignment of disparate events, motifs, or timelines in ways that generate interpretive significance. These alignments are seldom incidental, rather, they mirror a fundamental human drive to impose order, causality, and symbolic meaning onto the chaos of experience. By fabricating simultaneity where none objectively exists, both authors and characters participate in the imaginative construction of narrative worlds—shaping the internal coherence of the text and guiding the reader’s interpretive engagement. Thus, synchrony operates not merely as a formal device, but as a cognitive strategy that foregrounds the mental work involved in narrative understanding and the attribution of meaning within the unfolding of fictional time.

Paul Ricoeur’s *Time and Narrative* provides a compelling lens through which to examine the temporal and symbolic architecture of *Pale Fire*, particularly in terms of how characters create synchrony to impose coherence on emotional or cognitive disarray. Ricoeur’s work lays the groundwork for understanding narrative as a mechanism that confers temporal and causal order upon the fluid, often chaotic nature of lived experience. Central to his theory is the concept of emplotment, the narrative process through which disjointed events are organized into a coherent temporal sequence. He characterizes this process as a “discordant concordance,” a synthesis that reconciles the fragmented flow of phenomenological time with the structured, goal-oriented temporality of narrative²². Ricoeur’s threefold model of mimesis—prefiguration (Mimesis I), configuration (Mimesis II), and refiguration (Mimesis III)—maps out the transformative stages through which lived experience is shaped into narrative

²² Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, Volume 1. Translated by Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1984, p. 66.

meaning²³. His notion of “discordant concordance” is especially pertinent to interpreting Shade’s poetic composition and Kinbote’s appropriative glosses, as both reflect the effort to fuse divergent temporalities into a semblance of narrative unity.

In *Pale Fire*, Kinbote’s compulsive attempt to synchronize John Shade’s poetic creation with his imagined political saga of Zembla serves as a distorted enactment of Ricoeur’s emplotment model. Employing a highly selective and delusional form of narrative construction, Kinbote forcibly links the poem’s development with Gradus’s approach, intricately blending elements of Shade’s artistry, Zembla’s dynastic turmoil, and his own self-fashioned identity as an exiled monarch. This sense of synchrony does not emerge from any objective or actual simultaneity, rather, it is retroactively imposed to manufacture a cohesive narrative out of unrelated and disparate events. However, Kinbote’s endeavor to establish temporal and causal unity ultimately exposes the vulnerability of narrative coherence when it stems from pathological cognition. Though his synchronizations mimic the refined structure of emplotment, they reveal the fragility of narrative order when coherence is driven by obsession rather than reality. Seen from this perspective, *Pale Fire* functions as a metafictional critique of storytelling itself—exploring how meaning is constructed, distorted, and maintained through cognitive acts of pattern recognition and temporal alignment. Nabokov stages the tension between narrative as a means of knowing and narrative as a psychological defense, highlighting the precarious boundary between understanding and delusion, order and madness.

Brian Richardson’s theory of unnatural narratology also provides a valuable framework for analyzing the temporal and structural irregularities characteristic of postmodern fiction. According to Richardson, unnatural narratives deliberately disrupt traditional expectations of narrative coherence by breaching established conventions of time, sequence, and causality.²⁴ Such texts often utilize fragmented chronology, paradoxical temporalities, and retroactive causation to unsettle the reader’s usual methods of constructing a storyworld. *Pale Fire* exemplifies this narrative approach. Through Kinbote’s retrospective alignment of Shade’s poetic creation with Gradus’s deadly journey, the novel generates a narrative logic that is simultaneously complex and deceptive. Additionally, Nabokov’s use of poetic foreshadowing and recursive narrative elements—such

²³ *Idem*, p. 52–58.

²⁴ See Brian Richardson, *Unnatural Narratives: Theory, History, and Practice*, Columbus, Ohio State University Press, 2015.

as the poem's haunting premonition of its author's demise—serve to further undermine straightforward linear time. These features embody what Richardson terms “unnatural temporal frames,” where future occurrences ripple backward into the present narrative moment. Yet, these temporal distortions do more than disrupt chronology; they dramatize the human cognitive drive to find synchrony, to connect and interpret disparate events in meaningful patterns even when such coherence is artificial or fabricated. In this respect, *Pale Fire* functions as a work of postmodern experimentation and a sophisticated critique of the cognitive mechanisms underlying narrative comprehension. Nabokov draws attention to the interpretive acts through which both readers and characters construct causal connections, impose simultaneity, and weave symbolic meaning from apparent chaos. By exploiting these mental inclinations via unnatural narrative techniques, the novel blurs the line between imaginative storytelling and psychological imperative. *Pale Fire* reveals how the aesthetic manipulation of time and sequence can reflect and critique the mind's yearning for order, exposing the epistemological hazards embedded in our quest for narrative synchrony.

Synchronizing Tragedy: Hazel's Suicide and Televised Spectacle

In *Pale Fire*, synchrony functions both as a temporal coincidence and as a cognitive mechanism that links events, serving narrative and psychological roles. A striking instance of this is found in Shade's depiction of the television broadcast occurring simultaneously with Hazel's suicide. In this poetic representation, we observe the process of configuration (Mimesis II), where fragmented and disjointed temporal moments—Hazel's solitary actions, Shade's anxious anticipation, the flickering TV images, and the stormy weather—are woven into a coherent pattern. This pattern is structured not by linear causality but through emotional and symbolic synchrony. The events do not merely happen at the same time; rather, their significance emerges from their affective alignment and symbolic interplay. The contrast between Hazel's journey and the televised scenes—ranging from advertisements to violent premonitions and the commodification of desire—creates what Ricoeur terms a narrative concordance, a narrative process that imposes order on chaos²⁵. Yet, this coherence is simultaneously discordant, failing to reconcile the tension between

²⁵ Paul Ricoeur, *op. cit.*, p. 61–67.

Hazel’s personal anguish and the sanitized or commercial images dominating her surroundings. The synchrony between media portrayals and Hazel’s marginalization exemplifies Ricoeur’s argument that narrative does more than reflect reality—it actively shapes how reality is interpreted and remembered. Through his poetic structuring of Hazel’s last moments, Shade constructs a narrative identity—encompassing his roles as bereaved father, poet, and cultural critic—by arranging disparate events into a temporally unified sequence imbued with emotional and ethical weight.

In Shade’s narration of the events leading up to Hazel’s death, he intricately weaves her solitary movements with his own anxious anticipation of her return. This narrative interlacing generates a sense of experiential simultaneity, wherein father and daughter remain emotionally and temporally connected despite their physical separation. The synchronization of their actions—Hazel’s descent into despair alongside Shade’s growing foreboding—creates a dual consciousness that transcends conventional narrative time. Through this technique, Nabokov invites readers to engage cognitively, privileging associative pattern recognition over linear chronological progression. This synchrony foregrounds the novel’s theme of the illusory nature of causality, emphasizing the complex interplay among perception, memory, and poetic form.

Hazel’s tragic decision unfolds in the aftermath of a humiliating blind date with Pete Dean, a superficial encounter arranged through tenuous social connections—Pete being the cousin of Jane, the typist, whose fiancé links the chain to Shade. Upon meeting Hazel, Pete quickly deems her physically unattractive and invents a flimsy excuse: a friend facing jail time, prompting his immediate departure. Hazel, ever polite, accepts his abrupt exit without protest, though the psychological damage is profound. Her silent acquiescence conceals a deeper emotional rupture. Alone and abandoned, Hazel boards the bus home, embodying vulnerability and isolation. Meanwhile, the narrative shifts to Shade’s domestic sphere, where he waits anxiously for her return. His concern is noted by Sybil, who remarks on the time—“It’s eight fifteen” (II. 403)—a detail that synchronizes Hazel’s journey with the mounting domestic tension. This temporal alignment of parallel actions—Hazel’s descent into despair alongside Shade’s growing unease—exemplifies Nabokov’s use of synchrony, wherein simultaneous events are emotionally and symbolically intertwined to evoke a richer narrative cohesion.

Seeking distraction, Shade turns on the television, where “The screen / In its blank-broth evolved a lifelike blur/ And music welled” (II. 405–406). The vague

imagery and ambient sound blur the line between inner emotion and external stimuli, enveloping Shade in a numbing media haze. His unease sharpens into a misdirected flash of resentment: he directs accusatory anger toward Jane for arranging Hazel's ill-fated encounter with Pete—a metaphorical “death ray” (II. 407) that exemplifies the human tendency to attribute causality to proximate yet irrelevant agents. This cognitive reflex echoes the novel's broader exploration of how patterns of meaning are imposed. The subsequent television advertisement offers a grotesque juxtaposition: a hyper-stylized, eroticized commercial depicting a pirouetting nymph beneath rotating petals, genuflecting before a woodland altar adorned with toiletries—“A nymph came pirouetting, under white / Rotating petals, in a vernal rite / To kneel before an altar in a wood / Where various articles of toilet stood”²⁶. This surreal tableau mocks and magnifies the cruelty of contemporary beauty ideals, accentuating the stark contrast between Hazel's marginalization and the media's commodified femininity. Shade registers this with disdain, describing the scene's “vulgar ring”²⁷ (II. 420), signaling a broader cultural absurdity that trivializes genuine human suffering.

At the same moment, Sybil listens closely by the door, expecting the phone to ring—an auditory hallucination that reveals her emotional sensitivity to Hazel's absence. Meanwhile, Shade presses his hand against the window and peers into the fog, inhabiting a threshold moment heavy with ominous anticipation. The scene he observes—“More headlights in the fog... only some white fence/ And the reflector poles passed by unmasked”²⁸—functions simultaneously as a concrete depiction of Hazel's likely bus route and as a symbolic representation of the emotional and narrative obscurity surrounding her destiny. The vague lights cutting through the mist hint at impending disclosure but ultimately present only trivial visual fragments—reflector poles and roadside markers—mirroring the novel's persistent exploration of perception's limitations and the inherent difficulty of fully grasping another person's inner world. By situating the experiences of seemingly unrelated characters within the same temporal context, *Pale Fire* encourages readers to discern emotional and symbolic connections across separate narrative threads. This synchronization deepens the psychological complexity of the work, enabling everyday details—such as the hour, the television, or a windowpane—to become focal points of emotional intensity.

²⁶ Vladimir Nabokov, *op. cit.*, p. 413–416.

²⁷ *Idem*, p. 420.

²⁸ Vladimir Nabokov, *op. cit.*, p. 444–446.

The contrast between Hazel’s suicide and the televised image of a movie star serves as a sharp critique of the gap between authentic human suffering and the glossy superficiality of mass media culture. As Shade passively watches the screen, he encounters the idealized portrayal of celebrity: a visage characterized by “fair skin,” “parted lips,” and “swimming eyes”—a constructed emblem of allure and commercial fantasy. This moment is deliberately aligned with Hazel’s progression toward self-destruction. The concurrent unfolding of Hazel’s profound loneliness and the screen’s captivating imagery creates a poignant narrative irony, emphasizing the emotional rift between internal despair and external illusion. Shade’s reflection on the “soft form dissolving in the prism of corporate desire”²⁹ captures the novel’s complex exploration of commodification. The phrase blends the physical with the corporate, linking bodily beauty to the machinery of consumer capitalism. The woman’s figure is not merely sexualized but fractured and dispersed—shattered into a prism symbolizing the fragmented, artificial desires manufactured by the entertainment industry. Nabokov’s word choice is intentionally rich: “corporate” invokes both the physical (“corpus”) and institutional structures, thereby critiquing the intertwined nature of media and commerce in shaping emotional norms. Within this framework, beauty becomes a ghostly commodity, severed from the individual and reconstructed as a commercial spectacle. Shade’s proposal that he and Sybil watch a movie titled *Remorse* operates as a self-aware gesture—an indirect acknowledgment of his complicity in arranging Hazel’s ill-fated meeting with Pete Dean. The film’s title adds a metatextual dimension, layering personal regret onto a contrived narrative, paralleling Shade’s fragmented attempt to process Hazel’s tragedy. While Shade engages with this fictional cinema, Hazel physically arrives at Lochanhead, observing “ghostly trees”³⁰—a vivid, symbolic representation of her existential solitude and the spectral nature of the world she is departing. The scene’s impact emerges from this cognitive tension: the stylized, artificial rituals of entertainment stand in ironic opposition to Hazel’s quiet, unmediated death. This narrative simultaneity unveils Hazel’s fate and involves the reader in the interpretive task of discerning meaning through contrast, timing, and emotional resonance.

As the thunderstorm grows louder and more intense over the Goldsworth household, the violent sounds of nature externalize and heighten Shade’s increasing

²⁹ *Idem*, p. 452–456.

³⁰ Vladimir Nabokov, *op. cit.*, p. 460.

anxiety. This hunderstorm operates on both an atmospheric and symbolic level, reflecting the narrative chaos surrounding Hazel's destiny. At the same time, Sybil's casual interaction with the television—described by Nabokov ironically as “network roulette”—introduces a theme of unpredictability and fragmentation. The erratic switching of channels, jumping abruptly from loud advertisements to broken images, generates a disorienting visual and narrative environment. This moment of televisual instability mirrors the psychological confusion within the home and highlights the fragile border between mediated illusion and tangible reality. Importantly, the images displayed on the screen acquire ominous significance. While watching, Shade perceives a series of seemingly unrelated but symbolically charged visuals: an “imbecile with sideburns” aiming a gun³¹ and a “jovial Negro [who] raised his trumpet”³². Though these disconnected clips appear as mundane entertainment, they carry a prophetic weight within the poem's narrative framework. The gunman figure grotesquely prefigures Hazel's demise and more broadly foreshadows the eventual assassination scene involving Gradus. Similarly, the trumpet player anticipates the darkly comic climax where the gardener uses a spade to subdue Gradus—a violent act oddly consistent with the theatrical absurdity of televised spectacle. These fragments of television function as a form of symbolic synchrony, embedding narrative foreshadowing within the seemingly random media chatter. Shade's attention to the screen becomes an act of cognitive pattern recognition, in which chaotic images are retrospectively filled with significance. This process dramatizes one of *Pale Fire's* core epistemological themes: the imposition of narrative coherence on disorder, the emergence of meaning through associative rather than straightforward causal logic. The television functions as a reflective surface for projection. As the storm intensifies to its peak, Shade's inner turmoil is echoed by the “ominous imagery” emanating from the screen. The interaction between internal emotional experience and external stimuli blurs, producing a synesthetic convergence of sound, image, and anxiety. Commonly a symbol of distraction or cultural superficiality, here the television assumes a darker role: it acts as a conduit through which hidden fears are refracted and transformed into symbolic prophecy. By embedding foreshadowing within fleeting media content, Nabokov uses synchrony as a structural device that connects diverse elements—weather, emotion, media, and fate—into a richly layered network of symbolic meaning.

³¹ *Idem*, p. 468–469.

³² *Idem.*, p. 470.

As Sybil turns off the television, Shade observes, “As life snapped, we saw/
A pinhead light dwindle and die in black / Infinity,”³³ a poetic image that quietly anticipates Hazel’s impending death. The extinguishing of the TV’s glow symbolically mirrors Hazel’s fading life—creating a visual synchrony that connects mediated perception with intimate tragedy. Outside, a watchman and his anxious dog move through the “reedy back,” yet his arrival is delayed and ultimately futile: “he came too late,”³⁴ a phrase loaded with tragic finality. As midnight nears, the wind howls and twigs strike the windowpane, amplifying the tension and sense of foreboding. The narrative alternates between Hazel’s lonely trek and her parents’ worried watch, generating a contrapuntal rhythm that heightens emotional suspense and culminates in the shattering appearance of a patrol car: “And suddenly a festive blaze was flung/
Across five cedar trunks, snow patches showed,
And a patrol car on our bumpy road/
Came to a crunching stop. Retake, retake”³⁵! The jarring contrast—festive light illuminating a tragic event—captures the harsh, absurd intrusion of reality into Shade’s stylized narration. The tragic certainty of Hazel’s suicide is affirmed in the simple yet profound line, “She took her poor young life. I know. You know,”³⁶ a rare moment of direct clarity. Shade’s poetic reimagining of Hazel’s last moments—standing shivering beside the mist-shrouded lake before surrendering to its depths—elevates her death into a space of lyrical elegy, personal mourning, and metaphysical contemplation³⁷. Here, synchrony operates as both a psychological and aesthetic device, linking disparate events through emotional and symbolic resonance rather than linear causality. This structural synchrony between Shade’s poetic consciousness and the televised imagery serves a larger narrative purpose. On the night of Hazel’s death, the television content—ranging from advertisements to scenes of violence and seduction—stands as a grotesque counterpoint to the raw emotional reality within the home. The “soft form dissolving in the prism of corporate desire”³⁸ offers a harsh reminder of the cultural systems that commodify bodies, desires, and identities. The intersection of Hazel’s personal suffering with this mediated backdrop allows Nabokov to mount a sharp critique of mass media’s aesthetic and ethical barrenness.

³³ Vladimir Nabokov, *op. cit.*, p. 471–472.

³⁴ *Idem*, p. 477.

³⁵ *Idem*, p. 484–487.

³⁶ *Idem*, p. 493.

³⁷ *Idem*, p. 497–500.

³⁸ Vladimir Nabokov, *op. cit.*, p. 452–456.

Nabokov integrates Shade's critique of vulgar popular culture into the deeply intimate framework of personal grief. While commercialism is not depicted as the direct cause of Hazel's suicide, the societal ideals it promotes—prioritizing surface-level beauty, conformity, and visual spectacle—contribute to Hazel's marginalization. Her intelligence, emotional acuity, and unique personality are rendered invisible in a culture that prizes aesthetic appeal over inner life. In this way, Nabokov's narrative intersects with critiques found in cultural theory. As John Foster points out, Nabokov echoes concerns expressed by Horkheimer and Adorno, who viewed mass media and culture as profound threats to individual autonomy³⁹. From this angle, Shade's poetic mourning emerges not merely as an aesthetic stance but as a broader ideological response to a culture that suppresses individuality and pathologizes deviation. His lyrical condemnation of popular culture thus doubles as a lament for a society where collective cognition and cultural meaning-making have been appropriated by capitalist imperatives. Hazel's elegy becomes both a personal act of remembrance and a quiet defiance against the commodification of subjectivity. Through its intricate layering of poetic form, familial trauma, and mediated imagery, *Pale Fire* urges readers to interrogate the concealed mechanisms—both narrative and cultural—that inform perception, meaning, and value. Shade's use of poetic synchrony is not an escape from reality but a form of symbolic solace—a temporary coherence constructed in response to irreparable emotional rupture. This process aligns with Paul Ricoeur's concept of refiguration, wherein narrative interpretation reshapes lived experience. This is movingly realized in the closing lines of Shade's poem, as he envisions Hazel's final moments and seeks to derive meaning from the chaos of death. In this context, *Pale Fire* transcends its postmodern formalism; it stands as a deeply ethical meditation on the cultural forces that shape human consciousness and determine which lives—and narratives—are granted recognition and memory.

Temporal Distortions: Linking Shade's Poem with Gradus's Departure

Ricoeur's framework sheds light on Kinbote's obsessive attempt to reinterpret Shade's poem as a covert allegory for Zembla—an effort that constitutes an alternative mode of emplotment, albeit one that drastically misrepresents the

³⁹ John Burt Foster, "Poshlust, Culture Criticism, Adorno, and Malraux", in Julian Connolly (ed.), *Nabokov and His Fiction: New Perspective*, Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 217–235.

narrative coherence intended by Shade. This interpretive takeover exemplifies what might be termed a radical form of discordant concordance: a delusional attempt to impose order onto a poetic work that actively resists such reductive reinterpretation. Kinbote’s concept of synchrony—superimposing the exiled king’s political drama onto Shade’s introspective verse—does not resolve narrative fragmentation so much as deflect it. For Kinbote, storytelling operates as a psychological refuge, a strategy for evading the pain of isolation and personal loss by constructing a fantastical self-mythology. *Pale Fire* thus doubles as a meta-commentary on the function of narrative itself—its ability to configure time, shape identity, and mediate emotional trauma. Ricoeur’s theory highlights how synchrony in the novel transcends mere simultaneity, becoming instead a deeply symbolic and cognitive process. It allows characters—whether earnest or deluded—to make sense of disorder by weaving it into a narrative framework. Viewed from this perspective, *Pale Fire* emerges as a reflection on the human compulsion to organize temporal experience through storytelling, even when those narratives are fundamentally flawed or absurd. Narrative, in Nabokov’s hands, is shown to be both a survival mechanism and a site of epistemological tension.

Kinbote carefully aligns the timeline of Shade’s poetic composition with the unfolding path of Gradus’s regicidal mission. In his commentary on the lines “It’s eight fifteen (And here time forked),”⁴⁰ Kinbote notes the temporal overlap between Shade’s ordinary domestic routine—such as watching television—and the tragic aftermath of Hazel’s failed blind date. However, Kinbote’s acknowledgment of this temporal symmetry is undermined by his emotional aloofness. He characterizes Shade’s depiction of Hazel’s suicide as overly elaborate and dismisses it as a mere “synchronization device,” revealing a stark insensitivity to the emotional resonance embedded in the poem. This contrast accentuates the tension between empathetic poetic vision and detached interpretive control within the novel’s multifaceted narrative. Further, Kinbote constructs a parallel between Shade’s poetic endeavor and Gradus’s murderous progress by inserting Zemblan annotations that mirror the structure and rhythm of the poem itself. His interspersed commentary forges a complex web in which Gradus’s trajectory—from Zembla to New Wye—is mapped onto the evolving texture of Shade’s verse. This overlaying of plotlines intensifies the novel’s meditation on dualities: art and violence, creation and destruction,

⁴⁰ Vladimir Nabokov, *op. cit.*, p. 403–404.

coherence and entropy. By narratively synchronizing these two arcs, the novel compels readers to confront the fragile equilibrium between aesthetic form and existential disarray in the temporal act of narration.

Kinbote's manufactured synchrony is further illustrated in his annotation to Lines 1–4, "I was the shadow of the waxwing slain," where he aligns the inception of Shade's poem with Gradus's supposed departure from Zembla⁴¹. Yet this timeline is inherently flawed—Shade begins writing on July 1st, while Gradus leaves Onhava only on July 5th. The discrepancy reveals not just Kinbote's factual carelessness, but also the constructed nature of his narrative overlay. His manipulation of dates functions less as a faithful chronology and more as an attempt to insert his own mythos into the structure of the poem, bolstering his identity as the dethroned king. This contrived synchronization exemplifies the novel's broader concern with how narratives are cognitively shaped to generate meaning and authority—even in the face of temporal inconsistencies. Kinbote's imposition of synchrony destabilizes the credibility of his editorial persona and foregrounds *Pale Fire's* preoccupation with the tension between objective history and the imaginative reconfigurations that narrative demands.

Kinbote deepens the symbolic alignment between Shade's poem and Gradus's assassination plot by drawing on the motif of "greyness," linking it not only to Gradus's shifting identity but to the poem's tonal fabric. In his annotation to Line 17 ("And then the gradual") and Line 29 ("gray"), Kinbote emphasizes the phonetic proximity of "gradual" and "gray" as a deliberate narrative hinge⁴². This lexical pairing becomes his point of entry to introduce Gradus—whose identity is fragmented across a series of aliases such as Jack Degree, Jacques de Grey, James de Gray, Ravus, Ravenstone, and d'Argus⁴³. The repetition of the "gray" sound across these pseudonyms constructs a semantic and symbolic network, dissolving distinctions between individual identity and narrative symbol. In his later note to Line 949, "And all the time," Kinbote extends this catalogue to include names like "Vinogradus," "Jacques d'Argus," and "Jack Grey"⁴⁴, further entwining the character's protean identity with the text's recurring chromatic motifs. Through this name-play and cross-referential layering, Kinbote paints Gradus as both a literal assassin and an emblematic figure of entropy and disintegration. Disguised a wine merchant, Gradus morphs into a political

⁴¹ Vladimir Nabokov, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

⁴² *Idem*, p. 77.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Idem*, p. 273.

operative aligned with Zembla’s extremist fringe and charged with eliminating the exiled monarch. As Kinbote aligns Gradus’s journey from Zembla to New Wye with the unfolding structure of Shade’s poem, he asserts a kind of parallel development—two narrative trajectories growing in sync. He even directs the reader to his note on Line 596 for elaboration⁴⁵, reinforcing his claim that thematic and narrative cohesion is embedded within his editorial apparatus. The “gray” motif thus emerges as more than an incidental descriptor—it becomes a thematic axis around which ideas of duplicity, identity construction, and ontological ambiguity revolve.

Heeding Kinbote’s suggestion, we turn to his annotation on Line 596, where he presents a poetic variant allegedly found in Shade’s draft: “Should the dead murderer try to embrace/ His outraged victim whom he now must face?/ Do objects have a soul? Or perish must / Alike great temples and Tanagra dust”⁴⁶. Kinbote positions this passage as laden with metaphysical import, interpreting the phrase “Tanagra dust” as a synecdoche for the inevitable posthumous reckoning between Shade and Gradus. This meeting, he claims, will occur in a spiritual dimension where Shade’s “radiant spirit” awaits⁴⁷. He laments that Shade did not include these lines in the final poem, arguing that they are more thematically rich than what he considers the weaker lines 627–630. In his notes on Lines 597–608, Kinbote revisits this variant, asserting that Shade and Gradus are destined to encounter one another “in real life, in real death” as embodiments of the same “Tanagra dust”⁴⁸. He proceeds to speculate about Gradus’s behaviour had he succeeded in capturing the exiled King, turning to Shade’s depiction of the monarch’s composed defiance in captivity (Lines 606–608). From this imagined confrontation, Kinbote draws out an aphoristic principle—what he calls an “anti-Darwinian” axiom: “The one who kills is always his victim’s inferior”⁴⁹. Through such interpretive maneuvers, Kinbote blends poetic commentary with philosophical pronouncement, infusing Shade’s text with themes of guilt, cosmic justice, and moral hierarchy. This strategy implicates Gradus in Shade’s death and allows Kinbote to recast the poetic narrative as a metaphysical drama of vengeance, thus continuing his project of fusing Zembla with Shade’s verse.

⁴⁵ Vladimir Nabokov, *op. cit.*, p. 278.

⁴⁶ *Idem*, p. 231.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Idem*, p. 233.

⁴⁹ *Idem*, p. 234.

Kinbote's annotation to Line 17 is cross-referenced in two subsequent notes—those to Line 171 and to Lines 131–132—underscoring the recursive and self-reinforcing structure of his editorial narrative. In the note to Line 171, Kinbote briefly introduces the plot to assassinate the exiled King, linking it back to the earlier annotation: “(see note to Line 17 where some of his other activities are adumbrated)”⁵⁰. This reference suggests a slow narrative unfolding of Gradus's intentions, which grow more pronounced as he nears his target in both space and time. The methodical layering of detail reveals Kinbote's desire to map a thriller-like arc onto the poem's timeline, orchestrating an eventual convergence between Shade's lyrical meditation and his own cloak-and-dagger Zembla fantasy. The motif of “Tanagra dust,” in this context, functions doubly: as a poetic emblem of death and posthumous reckoning, and as a narrative device Kinbote uses to impose coherence and unity across the poem and his commentary. His interpretive strategy illustrates the process of emplotment—a cognitive act of narrative construction that strives to impose order on disorder—though filtered through Kinbote's unreliable, self-aggrandizing perspective.

In the note to Lines 131–132, Kinbote takes Shade's phrase “the shadow of the waxwing slain” as a symbolic projection of the poet's own fate, reading the slain bird as a foreshadowing of Shade's murder and the shattered reflection as a harbinger of Gradus's arrival (135). Here, Kinbote attributes a kind of generative power to the poem itself, claiming that it is “the magic action of Shade's poem itself, the very mechanism and sweep of verse, the powerful iambic motor” that propels Gradus toward his target⁵¹. This interpretation collapses the boundary between artistic process and narrative consequence, casting Shade's verse not merely as a poetic act but as the engine of unfolding tragedy. Again, Kinbote points readers back to Line 17 for further details, reinforcing his construction of an elaborate synchrony between Shade's initiation of the poem and Gradus's embarkation on his deadly mission. This web of cross-referenced notes demonstrates Kinbote's insistence on binding Shade's creative act to Gradus's journey, creating a carefully staged parallelism between poetic invention and destructive intent. By doing so, he shapes *Pale Fire* into a narrative palimpsest, where artistic creation and political violence are layered together in a structure that reflects both the aesthetic beauty of poetic form and the instability of truth under the strain of narrative imposition.

⁵⁰ Vladimir Nabokov, *op. cit.*, p. 152.

⁵¹ *Idem*, p. 137.

*Disrupted Causality:
Interweaving Shade’s Writing and Gradus’s Progression*

Kinbote’s effort to synchronize Gradus’s journey with the unfolding of Shade’s poem complicates the reader’s grasp of narrative cohesion. This entanglement of timelines places interpretive pressure on readers, who must constantly reassess the boundaries between synchronicity and coincidence, fiction and reality, and question the locus of narrative authority within the novel’s multilayered structure.

A key example of this synchrony appears in Kinbote’s commentary on Line 181, a note that resonates across his annotations to Lines 120–121, 167, and 209. In his gloss on Lines 120–121, Kinbote notes that Shade completed Canto One on July 4, 1959—the same day Gradus is said to have departed from Zembla. This correlation is further underscored by Kinbote’s description of Gradus’s “steady blunderings through two hemispheres”⁵², a phrase that blurs the line between accidental movement and sinister purpose, and which Kinbote reinforces by directing the reader to Line 181. Likewise, in the note to Line 167, Kinbote misstates Shade’s sixty-first birthday as his sixtieth, an error that does not hinder but rather intensifies his claim to interpretive urgency, as he implores readers to examine Line 181 “today” for relevant insight⁵³. The commentary to Line 209, titled “gradual decay,” returns to this synchronization once again: Kinbote records Gradus’s advance toward Copenhagen and links it to Shade’s ongoing poetic composition, remarking that Gradus “sped through this verse and is gone—presently to darken our pages again”⁵⁴. This evocative line casts Gradus as both a temporal marker and a narrative threat, punctuating the poem’s progress with the looming specter of violence. These interlinked annotations form a contrapuntal rhythm, in which Shade’s poetic development is repeatedly aligned with Gradus’s ominous trajectory. Kinbote’s recursive cross-referencing and thematic overlay reveal a deliberate attempt to construct narrative synchrony, drawing readers into a doubled timeline where artistic creation and impending catastrophe are intricately entwined. In doing so, *Pale Fire* invites its audience to scrutinize not just the reliability of narrative structure, but the mechanisms through which meaning is fabricated from temporal disjunction and interpretive desire.

⁵² Vladimir Nabokov, *op. cit.*, p. 117.

⁵³ *Idem*, p. 137.

⁵⁴ *Idem*, p. 163.

Given the repeated cross-referencing of the note to Line 181 in Kinbote's annotations to Lines 120–121, 167, and 209, a closer examination of its narrative and thematic import is essential. In this pivotal note, Kinbote asserts that Shade commenced Canto Two on July 5th, aligning this act of poetic composition with Gradus's departure from Zembla via a flight out of the Onhava airfield bound for Copenhagen⁵⁵. This synchronization exemplifies Nabokov's elaborate orchestration of temporal parallels within *Pale Fire*, where ostensibly unrelated narrative trajectories intersect to construct a rich, stratified temporal architecture. Kinbote's claim to know the precise date of Shade's poetic activity rests on his clandestine observation of Shade's birthday celebration on the same day. This act of voyeurism reveals Kinbote's intrusive, solipsistic tendencies and further complicates any suggestion of genuine intimacy or camaraderie with Shade. His awareness of Shade's birth date, gleaned not through personal connection but from the metadata on his book jackets, underscores the mediated—and arguably delusional—nature of their relationship. Moreover, Sybil's refusal to invite Kinbote to the gathering and his pejorative depiction of her as a “domestic censor” obstructing Zembla-related content⁵⁶ foregrounds the contested boundaries—both textual and interpersonal—that Kinbote attempts to transgress in his commentary.

Kinbote's self-styled identity as a “very sly Zemblan” and his description of his gift to Shade as a “royal gift”⁵⁷ function as subtle self-referential cues that both reinforce and destabilize his supposed royal persona. These disclosures—infused with performative irony—coincide with his act of surveillance, thus entwining the motifs of spying, authorship, and self-fashioning. The alignment of Shade's entry into Canto Two with Gradus's geopolitical departure becomes more than a plot device; it embodies a narrative and cognitive synchrony that exemplifies Nabokov's ambition to entwine poetic invention with political exile. By embedding such synchronies, Nabokov invites the reader to perceive the novel's multiple timelines not as linear sequences but as reflective surfaces within a hall of mirrors, where fiction and history, authorship and delusion, are in perpetual dialogue.

In his note to Line 17, Kinbote constructs a connection between Shade's depiction of Hazel as “a domestic ghost” (Line 230) and a Zemblan Shadow operative escorting Gradus into a clothing shop. This association, far from

⁵⁵ *Idem*, p. 158.

⁵⁶ Vladimir Nabokov, *op. cit.*, p. 81.

⁵⁷ *Idem*, p. 163.

coincidental, subtly binds the theme of spectral domesticity to the geopolitical specters of Zembla, evoking an atmosphere where personal memory and political subterfuge intersect. Kinbote invites further exploration through references to his annotations on Lines 286 and 408, thereby assembling a dense intertextual web that demands the reader’s sustained cognitive engagement and capacity to trace narrative echoes across multiple textual nodes. In the note on Line 286, “A jet’s pink trail above the sunset fire”⁵⁸, Kinbote situates Shade’s line within a precisely defined temporal scheme, revealing that this moment of poetic composition occurred on July 7—coinciding with Gradus’s second covert transit, from Copenhagen to Paris. This kind of temporal mirroring epitomizes Nabokov’s intricate manipulation of narrative time, where Gradus’s movements unfold in parallel with the inner rhythms of poetic creation.

Gradus’s activities during this phase—posing as a neutral commissioner to obtain intelligence from Oswin Breetwit—serve as a microcosm of the novel’s larger concerns with espionage, dissimulation, and the fragility of information. Kinbote’s disappointment at not discovering overt Zembla references in Shade’s poetry further amplifies these epistemic tensions. His complaint about the absence of warmth in what he frames as a “supposed” artistic kinship reveals the depth of his projection—and the disjunction between his fantasy of meaning and the poem’s actual content. This gap reinforces Kinbote’s unreliability and challenges readers to reflect on how narrative authority, identity, and interpretive legitimacy are constructed and contested within the text. Kinbote’s note to Line 408, titled “A male hand,” continues this interwoven narrative design by aligning Gradus’s covert journey from Geneva to Lex with Shade’s composition of Lines 406–416 on July 10. Disguised this time as an art dealer, Gradus attempts to extract information about the King from Odon. Though Odon immediately sees through the ruse and offers no useful intel, the encounter is not without consequence: a seemingly casual comment from a passerby about the Riviera revives Gradus’s memory of Queen Disa’s residence, thus setting the stage for further pursuit. The note concludes with an image of Gradus returning to Geneva just as Shade “takes a fresh card”⁵⁹, a potent symbol of narrative renewal. This moment encapsulates Nabokov’s deployment of parallel structure, linking disparate narrative actions through temporal coordination.

⁵⁸ *Idem*, p. 174.

⁵⁹ Vladimir Nabokov, *op. cit.*, p. 202.

The relationship between this note and those connected to Line 181 exemplifies Kinbote's attempt to synchronize Shade's poetic process with Gradus's unfolding mission. What emerges is a tightly interlaced narrative pattern in which seemingly independent trajectories are rendered mutually intelligible through Kinbote's commentary. This synchronization operates as more than a timeline device; it invites readers to recognize the interplay of poetic invention and political narrative as co-constitutive forces. Kinbote's Zembla-obsessed interpretation builds a complex epistemic structure where the boundaries between poem, plot, and personal obsession are porous and overlapping. Through this technique, Nabokov compels his readers into an active, interpretive labour of sorting through layered perspectives and competing truths, reinforcing *Pale Fire's* status as a profoundly self-reflexive literary artifact.

Fabricated Finality: Conflation of Poetic Completion and Assassination

Pale Fire functions as a cognitively immersive narrative, compelling readers to navigate and synthesize multiple, often conflicting storyworlds. In the novel, such modeling occurs through the tension between Kinbote's erratic, unreliable perspective and Shade's more disciplined poetic logic. The juxtaposition of these cognitive frameworks is enacted through narrative synchronizations—most notably the alignment of Shade's poetic milestones with Gradus's covert movements—orchestrated in Kinbote's annotations. This interplay across divergent narrative dimensions—artistic creation, political intrigue, and personal recollection—requires readers to reconcile layered temporalities and psychological states.

Within Kinbote's commentary on Canto Four, these patterns of synchrony are further developed to intensify the convergence of Shade's poetic closure with Gradus's nearing threat. In the note to Line 697, Gradus is depicted arriving at the airport on July 15, 1959, where he learns from a news source of a break-in at Villa Disa. This event becomes narratively consequential when a high-ranking member of the Shadows informs Gradus that the letter stolen during the burglary contains the address of the exiled King, thereby linking Kinbote's marginalia to his concealed royal identity. The annotation to Line 768 deepens this connection by detailing a letter the King sent from France on April 2, addressed with deliberate precision to "Dr. C. Kinbote, KINBOTE"—a contrast to the erroneous version, "Charles X. Kingbot,

Esq.”⁶⁰. Such meticulous emphasis on the exact wording highlights the novel’s preoccupation with naming, authorship, and the tenuous nature of identity. Kinbote further directs readers to the note on Line 49, labeled “shagbark,” where an incidental botanical reference becomes a conduit for broader symbolic meaning. There, he presents a quatrain written by Queen Disa and included in Shade’s album, citing another letter dated April 6, 1959, from southern France. These textual fragments reinforce Kinbote’s constructed identity as the exiled King, threading narrative into the broader metafictional fabric. Together, these notes exemplify how Nabokov mobilizes synchrony and intertextual annotation to blur boundaries between poetic composition, espionage plotlines, and questions of identity, thereby drawing the reader into an intricate cognitive engagement with the text’s layered fictional realities.

Through a network of cross-referenced annotations, Kinbote constructs a narrative synchrony that aligns Shade’s poetic progress with Gradus’s advancing plot. This synchronization not only knits together separate timelines but also erodes the clear demarcation between author, commentator, and character, complicating narrative authority. As readers navigate these interwoven layers, they are prompted to engage in active cognitive labor—interpreting clues, questioning motives, and assembling fragmented storylines into provisional wholes. Kinbote’s commentary becomes a metafictional instrument that not only drives the narrative forward but also interrogates broader themes of selfhood, authorship, and epistemic instability within *Pale Fire*. In his note to lines 835–838, Kinbote claims that Shade began composing Canto Four on July 19, though he derides the initial verses as overly intricate and chaotic, describing them as “the cunning working-in of several inter-echoing phrases into a jumble of enjambments”⁶¹. In the note to Line 873—“My best time”—Kinbote recounts Shade’s composition on July 20 while juxtaposing it with Gradus’s concurrent journey. As Shade pens this line, Gradus is boarding a jet at Orly airport, described in surreal terms: “fastening his seat belt, reading a newspaper, rising, soaring, desecrating the sky”⁶². The narrative layering continues in the note to Line 949, where Kinbote aligns Shade’s final writing session with Gradus’s transatlantic arrival. As Shade completes his poem in New Wye, Gradus lands in New York, symbolizing a convergence of fates: “two silent time zones had now merged to form the standard time of one man’s

⁶⁰ Vladimir Nabokov, *op. cit.*, p. 256.

⁶¹ *Idem*, p. 263.

⁶² *Ibid.*

fate”⁶³. Gradus then proceeds to New Wye, where he is recognized by Kinbote, allegedly by his facial features. Yet, an inconsistency surfaces: while Kinbote claims that Gradus was chauffeured by Emerald to the address, police reports indicate that Gradus hitchhiked with a trucker from Roanoke. This narrative discrepancy further undermines Kinbote’s credibility and casts doubt on the veracity of his account.

In the final note on Line 999, Kinbote recounts the dramatic climax of *Pale Fire*, where Shade finishes the poem’s last line just as Gradus arrives at the Goldsworth home and shoots him. Kinbote insists that he, rather than Shade, was the true target of the assassination attempt. Yet Gradus’s behavior contradicts this claim: he ignores Kinbote entirely and focuses solely on Shade. The mystery deepens when Gradus identifies himself to the authorities as “Jack Grey, no fixed abode, except the Institute for the Criminal Insane,”⁶⁴ prompting suspicion that he is a fugitive mental patient. Further complicating matters is the possibility that Grey was actually seeking revenge against Judge Goldsworth, who had previously imprisoned him, and mistakenly shot Shade after entering the wrong house. While this alternative scenario seems credible, Kinbote rejects it outright. He dismisses Grey’s confession as a ruse and interprets his later suicide in prison as remorse for failing to kill the exiled Zemblan monarch. Through this, Kinbote stubbornly holds on to his distorted narrative, even as mounting evidence challenges his version of events.

This episode exemplifies one of the novel’s deployments of narrative synchrony, where Shade’s poetic completion and Gradus’s act of violence are framed as occurring in tandem both temporally and thematically. Kinbote’s insistence on this alignment fulfills a dual purpose: narratively, it creates the appearance of a fated intersection between artistic endeavor and political intrigue; cognitively, it leverages the reader’s tendency to impose causality and coherence upon coincidental events. By synchronizing the final moments of Shade’s creative work with the brutal disruption of that work, Kinbote retroactively molds the poem into a teleological narrative—one that buttresses his Zemblan delusion and recasts the poem as a veiled testament to exile and fate. This orchestrated synchrony is no accident but a deliberate part of Kinbote’s grand design to transform the poem into a political allegory and himself into its central protagonist. As such, the synchrony functions as a calculated narrative

⁶³ *Idem*, p. 273.

⁶⁴ *Idem*, p. 265.

strategy: it dramatizes the convergence of timelines while simultaneously probing the limits of narrative credibility and cognitive coherence. Kinbote’s obsessive attempts to correlate Shade’s poetic timeline with Gradus’s actions highlight the constructed nature of these connections, urging readers to question the narrator’s authority and the legitimacy of inferred causal links in fiction. The interplay between creation and destruction, poetic composition and assassination, serves as a thematic reflection of *Pale Fire*’s deeper concerns with authorship, madness, and humanity’s cognitive drive to impose order on chaos.

Conclusions

In *Pale Fire*, synchrony functions not simply as a temporal coincidence but as an intentional narrative mechanism that links seemingly unrelated events to underscore key thematic and ideological concerns. Shade’s deployment of synchrony poignantly situates Hazel’s tragic suicide alongside the tense anticipation of her return, while Kinbote’s manipulation intricately interlaces Shade’s poetic process with Gradus’s violent mission. Shade confronts his grief over Hazel’s death by ascribing profound meaning to simultaneity. He cites a television broadcast airing at the moment of Hazel’s suicide, interpreting the mundane program as a haunting echo of his personal anguish. This juxtaposition captures Shade’s emotional turmoil and his poetic drive to endow coincidence with metaphysical significance. By pairing Hazel’s death with an ordinary cultural moment, Shade attempts to reconcile individual loss with a larger, elusive cosmic order. Here, synchrony serves both as a cognitive coping strategy and a poetic device, allowing Shade to shape grief into a narrative form that facilitates intellectual and emotional understanding. By contrast, Kinbote wields synchrony for a more invasive and self-serving purpose. The alleged simultaneity between Shade’s poem composition and Gradus’s violent actions is not an objective reality but a deliberate, constructed alignment that serves Kinbote’s broader agenda: the invention of Zembla and the affirmation of his identity as its displaced monarch. This imposed synchrony reflects Kinbote’s urge to rewrite reality through narrative control. By forging artificial connections between unrelated timelines, he asserts dominance over the narrative, suppresses Shade’s independent poetic voice, and substitutes genuine inquiry with paranoid fantasy. For Kinbote, synchrony becomes an instrument of narrative colonization and distortion of knowledge.

Three interconnected arguments clarify this dynamic. First, synchrony in *Pale Fire* surpasses mere temporal coincidence to operate as a purposeful narrative strategy that juxtaposes seemingly unrelated events for thematic and ideological impact. Kinbote's alignment of Shade's poetic creation with Gradus's violent mission is not an impartial correlation but a deliberate merging that fuses Shade's literary reality with the fabricated world of Zembla, highlighting Kinbote's unreliability and his impulse toward self-mythologizing. Second, the novel presents a nuanced reflection on the nature of synchrony itself, demonstrating how events occurring at different paces and places can be experienced as simultaneous from certain subjective perspectives. Shade's narrative places Hazel's tragic fate alongside contemporary television broadcasts, creating layered temporal intersections that evoke rich emotional and cognitive responses. Similarly, Kinbote's perception of Shade's poem and Gradus's ominous journey as parallel underscores the perspectival and unstable quality of synchrony within the novel's metafictional design. Third, Kinbote uses synchrony as a metanarrative tool to connect the novel's nested fictional layers, subverting traditional narrative hierarchies and linear causality. By encouraging readers to decipher these synchronized patterns, Kinbote invites an interpretive engagement aimed at unveiling thematic resonances between Shade's poem and the mythic political saga of Zembla.

These moments of synchrony are not merely reflections of character psychology; they function as formal features of the novel's structure, embodying Nabokov's aesthetic and philosophical concerns. The footnoted format, the shifting narrative authority, and the nonlinear interplay between commentary and poem all mirror the characters' attempts to impose coherence through cognitive and temporal alignment.

Pale Fire dramatizes the human desire to find order amid chaos—whether in mourning or madness. Here, synchrony acts as a literary manifestation of cognitive pattern recognition, spotlighting the interpretive efforts of both characters and readers. By embedding synchrony into its narrative fabric, Nabokov challenges readers to question not only the content but also the method and purpose of event alignment—raising profound questions about authorship, authority, and the innate human urge to construct meaning from simultaneity.

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TRANSLATION AND THE PAST: ROLAND BARTHES AND THE “RECOVERY” OF CZECHOSLOVAK STRUCTURALISM IN THE 1960s

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Abstract: After years of emphasizing translation primarily as a way of bringing “newness into the world” (Bhabha), scholars have recently renewed their interest in translation’s relationship to the past, referring to it as a recovery of lost time or as the (Benjaminian) “afterlife” of past texts. Those who are specifically concerned with the translation of philosophical and theoretical texts now also focus on “untranslatables” that continually produce new translations. So far, this has mostly been seen as a means to emancipate the history of theory from the tyranny of linear time, but it also caters to a discourse that rethinks translation as a way of doing both theory and its history. What unites all these approaches is that they exclusively understand the past that translation relates to as the past of the source text. As the paper claims, however, translation can also function as a means to recover and, potentially, (re)write the history of the *receiving* context. This is discussed by drawing on the example of the translation of French structuralism and, especially, of Roland Barthes in Czechoslovakia in the second half of the 1960s which significantly contributes to the “recovery” of the local structuralist tradition of the interwar period that had been muted first by the war and, subsequently, by Stalinist cultural politics. Besides the first-ever book-length translation of Barthes’ into Czech (*Nulový stupeň rukopisu – Základy sémiologie*, 1967), it also examines hitherto unstudied material from the archive of Československý spisovatel, the publisher responsible for the translation’s release.

Keywords: French structuralism, Czechoslovak structuralism, translation of theory, translation history, Roland Barthes.

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Translation as Recovery

After years of emphasizing translation primarily as a way of bringing “newness into the world,”¹ scholars have recently renewed their interest in translation’s relationship to the past. While some of them refer to translation as a recovery of lost time or, in a more Benjaminian manner, as the “afterlife” of past texts, others focus on the specific temporality of translation and emphasize that, by building on pre-existing texts, it produces new presences for elements belonging to the past². And many of those specifically concerned with the translation of philosophical and theoretical texts now focus on the so-called “untranslatables,” i.e., on “symptoms of difference”³ that continually produce new translations. So far, this has mostly been seen as a means to emancipate the history of theory from the tyranny of linear time, but it also caters to a discourse that rethinks translation as a way of doing both theory and its history⁴. What unites all these approaches, however, is the fact that they mostly understand the past that translation relates to as the past of the source text and its context of origin. The most canonical example for this is, without doubt, Tzvetan Todorov’s *Theory of Literature* [*Théorie de la littérature*, 1965] and the ways it used the translation of Russian formalist writings to retrospectively bestow French structuralism with a dignifying past⁵.

As I argue, however, translation can also function as a means to recover and, potentially, to (re)write the history of the receiving context. A case in point for this is the translation of French structuralism in Czechoslovakia in

¹ Homi Bhabha, “How Newness Enters the World. Postmodern Space, Postcolonial Times and the Trials of Cultural Translation,” in *The Location of Culture*, London, New York, Routledge, 2004, p. 303–37.

² Cf. Theo Hermans, *Translation and History. A Textbook*, London, New York, Routledge, 2022; Alexandra Lianeri, “A Regime of Untranslatables. Temporalities of Translation and Conceptual History,” *History and Theory*, vol. 53, no. 4, 2014, p. 473–97; Saša Hrnjez, “Too Late to Translate? On Belatedness and Translation,” *Perspectives*, 2022, p. 1–13.

³ Barbara Cassin (ed.), “Introduction,” in *Dictionary of Untranslatables. A Philosophical Lexicon*, Princeton, Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2017, p. XVII.

⁴ Cf. Emily Apter, *Against World Literature*, London, New York, Verso, 2013, p. 247–49.

⁵ *Théorie de la littérature. Textes des formalistes russes réunis, présentés et traduits par Tzvetan Todorov. Préface de Roman Jakobson*, Paris, Édition du Seuil, 1965. See also Frédérique Matonti, “Entre Moscou et Prague. Les premières réceptions des formalistes russes par les intellectuels communistes français (1967–1971),” *Langage*, no. 182, 2011, p. 69–81; as well as Frédérique Matonti, “Premières réceptions françaises du formalisme. Retour sur Théorie de la littérature”, *Communications*, no. 103, 2018, p. 41–53.

the second half of the 1960s, for it coincided with the “recovery” [oživení]⁶ of the local structuralist tradition that had been discontinued first by the war and, subsequently, by Stalinist cultural politics. To date, Czech scholarship has largely viewed these as two separate events that happened to take place at the same time and certainly knew of each other but had otherwise very little overlap. Květoslav Chvatík for example writes that

[t]he development of the Prague School in the 1960s [...] coincided with the rise of the structuralist debate in France. It should be noted that, despite being parallel in time, these two currents originated from different sources and a different philosophical atmosphere. While the French structuralists reacted above all to the subjectivism of Sartre’s existentialism, the Czech authors endeavored to liberate Marxism from its dogmatic and voluntaristic interpretation. [...] [They] took up the tradition of the Prague Linguistic Circle under new premises; what was new was a more profound knowledge of Anglo-Saxon semiotics [...] and the attempts at a Marxist reinterpretation of semantics [...]. While the French authors had very little information about the Prague School [...], the Prague center was much better informed about the Parisian discussions in the second half of the 1960s. Nevertheless, the direct impact of the French authors [remained] limited to a minimum⁷.

⁶ Milan Jankovič, “Oživená Tradice Pražského Strukturalismu,” in *Zlatá Šedesátá. Materiály z Konference Pořádané Ústavem pro Českou Literaturu AV ČR. 16–18. Června 1999*, ed. by Radka Denemarková, Praha, Ústav pro českou literaturu AV ČR, 2000, p. 72–81; see also Ondřej Sládek, “O ‚návratech‘ a strukturalismu Milana Jankoviče,” *Česká literatura*, vol. 67, no. 3, 2019, p. 380–89.

⁷ “Die Entwicklung der Prager Schule der 60er Jahre [...], fällt mit dem Aufschwung der Strukturalismus-Diskussion in Frankreich zusammen. Es ist festzustellen, daß diese beiden Strömungen trotz der zeitlichen Parallele von verschiedenen Quellen und von einer unterschiedlichen philosophischen Atmosphäre ausgingen. Während die französischen Strukturalisten vor allem auf den Subjektivismus des Sartreschen Existentialismus reagierten, bemühten sich die tschechischen Autoren um eine Befreiung des Marxismus von seiner dogmatischen und voluntaristischen Interpretation. [Sie] knüpften auf einer neuen Grundlage an die Tradition des Prager Linguistenkreises an; neu war die tiefere Kenntnis der angelsächsischen Semiotik [...] und das Bemühen um eine marxistische Interpretation der Semantik [...]. Während die französischen Autoren von der Prager Schule sehr dürftige Informationen besaßen [...] waren im Prager Zentrum die Informationen über die Pariser Diskussion in der zweiten Hälfte der 60er Jahre bedeutend besser. dennoch blieb die direkte Wirkung der französischen Autoren auf ein Minimum beschränkt”. Květoslav Chvatík, *Tschechoslowakischer Strukturalismus. Theorie und Geschichte*, translated by Vlado Müller, München, Wilhelm Fink, 1981, p. 71, translated by me. For a somewhat more nuanced view cf. Ondřej Sládek, “Doslov. Český strukturalismus pohledem zahraničních diskusí,” in *Český strukturalismus v diskusí*, Brno, Host, 2014, p. 335–363.

In my opinion, this statement perfectly illustrates the widespread tendency to reduce the role of translation processes for the history of theory to questions of *conceptual* impact and of how it might manifest in *future* writings. This is problematic already insofar as that in the years following the violent crackdown of the Prague Spring many of the scholars involved in this “recovery”—including Chvatík himself—emigrated to Western Europe and North America, where they rebuilt their academic careers by “selling” Czechoslovak structuralism as a historical rather than a contemporary phenomenon⁸. Whereas at home, structuralism was once again pushed out of public discourse and into the realm of the private and the clandestine which, too, contributed to a certain “conservation” [*zakonzervování*]⁹, if not “musealization” of its interwar state¹⁰. It is, thus, crucial to reconsider translation’s role in different terms and, specifically, with regard to how it contributed to the recovery of the local tradition in the first place.

In what follows I will discuss this drawing on the example of the first book-length translation of Roland Barthes’ writings into Czech, *Nulový stupeň rukopisu – Základy sémiologie* [*Writing Degree Zero – Elements of Semiology*, 1967]¹¹. As I argue, this publication demonstrates not only that there was, in fact, a significant overlap between the recovery of local interwar structuralism and the translation of French structuralist writings but also that translation was deliberately used to recover local structuralist concepts and terminology. In some way, this led to the imagining of an alternate history of Czechoslovak structuralism and of how it could have further developed under more favorable

⁸ This also applies to the book quoted above. Being the first-ever attempt at writing a comprehensive introduction to Czechoslovak structuralism, it was published only after the author’s emigration to West Germany in 1979 where he taught first at the University of Constance and later in Munich. Similar cases were represented, among others, by Ladislav Matejka, Peter Steiner, and Jindřich Toman in the US, as well as by Mojmír Grygar in the Netherlands.

⁹ Vladimír Macura, “Lotmanova ‘jiná’ Dekonstrukce,” *Tvar*, vol. 6, no. 1, 1995, p. 10; cf. also Anna Förster, “Semiosphäre, Übertragungscharakter, Dekonstruktion. Vladimír Macura und das Spätwerk Jurij Lotmans,” *Brücken*, vol. 28, no. 1, 2021, p. 45–65.

¹⁰ Here, I am paraphrasing the Slovak scholar Anton Popovič who, in 1970, criticized his Czech colleagues for aiming only at what he calls “some musealized form of structuralism” [akási muzeálna podoba štrukturalizmu]. Anton Popovič, *Štrukturalizmus v slovenskej vede. 193–1949*, Martin, Matica slovenská, 1970, p. 51; a similar point is made by Popovič’s colleague at the Slovak Academy of Science, Nora Krausová. Cf. Nora Krausová, “Pražská fonologická škola a francúzsky štrukturalizmus,” *Romboid* 2, no. 4 (1966), p. 48–52.

¹¹ Roland Barthes, *Nulový stupeň rukopisu – Základy sémiologie*, trans. by Josef Čermák and Josef Dubský, Edice Dílna 29, Praha, Československý spisovatel, 1967.

political and societal circumstances. Besides the translation itself, the chapter also draws on hitherto unexamined material from the archive of Československý spisovatel [“The Czechoslovak Writer”], the publisher responsible for the release of *Nulový stupeň rukopisu – Základy sémiologie*¹².

Before taking a closer look at this material, however, it is important to note that this translation occurred at a crucial moment in time. Even though it was published only in late 1967, as we learn from the archival material, the project itself was first launched in the spring of 1966¹³, thus, at the beginning of a year that, in France, was later dubbed the “annum mirabile” of structuralism, marked by the simultaneous publication of Roland Barthes’ *Criticism and Truth*, Greimas’ *Structural Semantics*, Foucault’s *Order of Things*, and Lacan’s *Écrits*¹⁴. At the same time, internationally, 1966 would become canonized as the year in which structuralism already entered the phase of its decline, as exemplified by the infamous Baltimore conference and, especially by Derrida’s contribution—“Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences” [« La structure, le signe et le jeu dans le discours des sciences humaines »¹⁵]. In Czechoslovakia, on the other hand, 1966 marked, first and foremost, the 75th birthday of Jan Mukařovský, the co-founder of the Prague Linguistic circle and later rector of Prague’s Charles University who had officially renounced structuralism in 1951¹⁶. This being only two years prior to the Prague Spring, a number of Mukařovský’s former students succeeded in what had been unthinkable for at least one and a half decades by editing not only a tome of their teacher’s war time writings¹⁷ but also a festschrift called

¹² The publisher’s archive is preserved by the Monument of National Literature, Prague [Památník národního písemnictví, PNP]. All archival sources referred to hereafter form part of this collection. I would like to thank Jan Krejčí, Eva Jančevová, and Jana Färberová of the PNP for their help with locating and reproducing the materials in question. The collection is extremely voluminous; so far, it has been neither cataloged nor digitized.

¹³ Cf. letter by Jiří Levý to the editorial board of Československý spiovatel, April 4, 1966.

¹⁴ Cf. François Dosse, *History of Structuralism. Vol 1: The Rising Sign, 1945–1966*, trans. Deborah Glassman, Minneapolis, London, University of Minnesota Press, 1997, p. 316.

¹⁵ Jacques Derrida, “La structure, le signe et le jeu dans le discours des sciences humaines,” in *L’écriture et la différence*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1967, 409–428; on the Baltimore conference see François Cusset, *French Theory. How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, & Co Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States*, trans. Jeff Fort, Minneapolis, London, University of Minnesota Press, 2008, p. 28–32.

¹⁶ Cf. Jan Mukařovský, “Ke kritice strukturalismu v naší literární vědě,” *Tvorba*, vol. 20, no. 40, 1951, p. 964–65.

¹⁷ Jan Mukařovský, *Studie z Estetiky*, ed. Květoslav Chvatík, Praha, Odeon, 1966; other members

Structure and Meaning of the Literary Work [Struktura a smysl literárního díla] that aimed specifically at eventually acknowledging Mukařovský's contribution to literary studies and aesthetic theory¹⁸. Additionally, this was accompanied by the (re)issuing of several publications dedicated to the avantgarde literature and art that had been closely entangled with the work of the Prague Linguistic Circle¹⁹.

As I argue, even though it would be gradually superseded by more recent and much more contemporary theorizing carried mostly by a younger generation of scholars, this initial retrospectivity of the structuralist “recovery” is highly significant and very much in tune with a more general societal desire to come to terms with the recent past and, specifically, with the history of Czechoslovak communism. Historians usually limit this to the 1960s investigation of Stalinist crimes and the rehabilitation of the victims of the show trials of the previous decade²⁰. With regard to the history of theory, however, this meant, most importantly, to reconsider the relationship between Marxism and structuralism that, since the Communist seize of power in 1948, had essentially been propagated as mutually exclusive. This is why, for some, the engagement with texts that were not only structuralist but also written by authors affiliated with or at least sympathetic towards the French Communist Party almost offered itself as a “healing” of sorts²¹.

of the Prague Linguistic Circle, too, were the subject of renewed editorial efforts, although to a much lesser degree. Cf. for example Vilém Mathesius, *Řeč a Sloh*, ed. Josef Vachek, Praha, Československý spisovatel, 1966.

¹⁸ Milan Jankovič, Zdeněk Pešat, and Felix Vodička (eds.), *Struktura a smysl literárního díla. Janu Mukařovskému k 75. narozeninám*, Praha, Československý spisovatel, 1966.

¹⁹ Květoslav Chvatík and Zdeněk Pešat (eds.), *Poetismus*, Praha, Odeon, 1967; Petr Král (ed.), *Karel Teige a Film*, Praha, Filmový ústav, 1967; Stanislav Dvorský (ed.), *Surrealistické výcho-disko 1938–1968*, Praha, Československý spisovatel, 1969; Květoslav Chvatík, *Strukturalismus a Avantgarda*, Praha, Československý spisovatel, 1970; on the nature and scope of the Prague Linguistic Circle's entanglement with avantgarde literature see e.g. Jindřich Toman, *The Magic Of a Common Language. Jakobson, Mathesius, Trubetzkoy, and the Prague Linguistic Circle*, Cambridge (Mass.), London: The MIT Press, 1995, p. 217–242.

²⁰ See, for instance, the chapter “Vergangenheit im Prager Frühling” in Martin Schulze Wessel, *Der Prager Frühling. Aufbruch in Eine Neue Welt*, Stuttgart: Reclam, 2018, p. 20–51 as well as Martin Schulze Wessel, *Zeitordnungen des Prager Frühlings. Erwartungshorizonte und Erfahrungsräume einer gescheiterten Revolution*, ed. Christian Lübke, Wien, Böhlau, 2022.

²¹ A prime example for this is a volume called *Parisian Conversations on Structuralism* [Pařížské rozhovory o strukturalismu]. Published in 1969, it was the product of a collaboration between the Prague-based scholar Mojmir Grygar and the journalist and art historian Pierre Daix who was then the editor in chief of Louis Aragon's journal *Les lettres françaises* which was financed by the

Pre-Dating French Structuralism

As indicated by its somewhat awkward composite title, *Nulový stupeň rukopisu— Základy sémiologie*, included not one but two texts by Barthes that not only differed in terms of content and style but also belonged to very different periods of the author’s career: *Writing Degree Zero* and *Elements of Semiology*. Barthes’ debut *Writing Degree Zero* dates back to 1953, thus, to a time when the author presented himself as a political rather than a structuralist writer. After years spent in sanatoriums as well as in Romania and Egypt, Barthes had just returned to a “productive life” [« vie productive »] in France²². In Bucharest, he had witnessed the fall of a conservative monarchy and the proclamation of a socialist people’s republic, and despite the overt xenophobia and homophobia of the new regime he had followed these events rather sympathetically²³. In Alexandria, he had been very much considered as a communist, especially after he had once used the word “bourgeois” in a public lecture²⁴. And, last but not least, most of the essays that later formed individual chapters of *Writing Degree Zero* had first been published in explicitly political journals such as, for instance, Camus’ *Combat*. The book itself obviously aimed at mediating between existentialist and orthodox Marxist positions, echoing, among others,

French Communist Party. In 1967 and 1968, Daix had payed several visits to the Czechoslovak capital, closely observing the country’s political and cultural changes leading up to the Prague Spring. Besides accounting for his journalistic interest, Daix’s writings at the time also reveal the extent to which the reform process launched by the Czechoslovak Communist Party served as a ‘healing’ for his own disenchantment with communism; in many ways, this is exemplary for the reception of the Prague Spring by French left-wing intellectuals. Cf. Mojmír Grygar (ed.), *Pařížské Rozhovory o Strukturalismu*, Praha: Nakladatelství Svoboda, 1969 and, especially the introductory “Prague Conversation” [“Pražský rozhovor”] between Grygar and Daix, p. 5–22. The reportages and essays written during Daix’s trips were eventually published in two books. Cf. Pierre Daix, *Journal de Prague. Décembre 1967–Septembre 1968*, Paris, Julliard, 1968 and *Prague Au Cœur*, Paris, Union générale d’éditions, 1974. The latter is particularly interesting for it also contains several texts written after 1968; together, they perfectly illustrate the extent to which the crushing of the Prague Spring sealed the turning-away of the French intellectual scene not only from the Soviet Union but also from communism at large. For this, see also Grémion, Pierre: *Paris–Prague. La gauche face au renouveau et à la régression tchécoslovaque, 1968–1978*, Paris, Julliard, 1984.

²² Roland Barthes, *Œuvres complètes, vol 4: 1972–1976*, ed. Éric Marty, Paris: Seuil, 2002, p. 582.

²³ Cf. Louis-Jean Calvet, *Roland Barthes. 1915–1980*, Paris: Flammarion, 1990, p. 110–18. Regarding Barthes’ stay in Bucharest and the subsequent reception of his works in Romania see Alexandru Matei, “Roland Barthes and the Reception of French Structuralism in Socialist Romania”, *Ekphrasis*, no. 1, 2018, p. 66–80 as well as Alexandru Matei, *Roland Barthes: Mitologii românești, urmate de fântâna barthesiană*, București, Editura Art, 2017.

²⁴ Cf. Calvet, *op. cit.*, p. 119–120.

Sartre's notion of engagement as well as his writings on Camus²⁵. To most East Central European readers, however, *Writing Degree Zero* appeared "marxizing" rather than actually Marxist²⁶.

The second text, *Elements of Semiology*, on the other hand, was the byproduct of a series of seminars Barthes had taught at the École Pratique des Hautes Études in the early sixties. Initially not written for publication at all, the text had been first released in 1964 in an Italian translation by Einaudi in Mailand²⁷ and then, a few months later, in French by the journal *Communications*²⁸. Unlike *Writing Degree Zero*, it was not a polemical and, even less so, a political—or politicizing—text but proof of Barthes' considerable approximation with French academic language in the sixties. It explicitly aimed at systematizing the field of structural linguistics, literary theory, and semiology which had become rather crowded due to the feverish activities of the previous years. The expressed goal was to lay the foundations of a new "translinguistic" [« translinguistique »]²⁹ discipline that would eventually also include non-verbal sign systems. This foundational claim was nowhere as apparent as in the text's title and its allusion to both Tesnières' 1959 *Elements of Structural Syntax* [« Éléments de syntaxe structurale »] and Martinet's seminal book *Elements of a General Linguistics* [« Éléments de linguistique générale »] published in 1961³⁰. Unlike the polemical language of *Writing Degree Zero* that often bordered with essayistic forms and treated linguistic and philosophical terminology rather freely, *Elements of Semiology* presented as highly scientific.

²⁵ This applies, most importantly, to Sartre's essay « Explication de l'Étranger », *Situations I*, Paris: Librairie Gallimard 1947, p. 99–121. For an English translation see Jean-Paul Sartre, "An Explication of the Stranger," trans. Annette Michelson, n.d., https://waxwing.no/sysprv/sartre_explication_stranger.html.

²⁶ Cf. the Polish literary scholar Jan Błoński in the preface to his translation of Barthes' *Mythologies*. Jan Błoński, "Słowo wstępne," in *Mit i Znak*, Warszawa, Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1970, p. 5–21, esp. p. 10; for the Czech context see, retrospectively, Josef Fulka, "Překlad Barthesových Mytologií: mezi marxismem a sémiologie," in *Český překlad II (1945–2004)*, Praha, Univerzita Karlova, Filozofická fakulta, 2005, p. 351–358.

²⁷ For background information on this Italian publication see Umberto Eco, "La maestria de Barthes," in *Mitologie di Roland Barthes. I testi e gli atti (Convegno di Reggio Emilia, 13–14 Aprile 1984)*, ed. by Paolo Fabbri and Isabella Pazzini, Parma, Pratiche, 1986, p. 300.

²⁸ Roland Barthes, « Éléments de Sémiologie » *Communications*, no. 4, 1964, p. 91–135.

²⁹ Cf. (with reference to Benveniste) Roland Barthes, *Œuvres complètes, vol 3: 1968–1971*, ed. Éric Marty, Paris, Seuil, 2002, p. 611–612.

³⁰ Lucien Tesnière, *Éléments de syntaxe structurale*, Paris, Klincksieck, 1959; André Martinet, *Éléments de linguistique générale*, Paris, Colin, 1961.

As we learn from the bibliographical data included in *Nulový stupeň rukopisu—Základy sémiologie*, the Czech translation was based neither on the first edition of *Writing Degree Zero* nor on the periodical version of *Elements of Semiology* but on a recent republication of Barthes’ début by the Parisian publisher Édition Gonthier that had also included *Elements of Semiology* as an addendum³¹.

There, the two texts had been accompanied by a commentary written by Barthes himself in which he explained this surprising pairing. It is worth quoting this commentary in its entirety:

Ten years separate the two texts collected here. The first (*Le Degré Zéro de l’Écriture*) dates from 1953; it is a free reflection on the historical condition of literary language [...]. The second text (*Éléments de Sémiologie*) appeared in 1964 [...]; it is a didactic text [...]: it assumes, after Saussure, the existence of a new discipline, semiology or the science of meanings, and describes the concepts of structural linguistics that can help develop it; as structuralism is now tending to penetrate the human sciences, we thought it might be useful to give a reasoned terminology. These two texts have neither the same tone nor the same subject; but perhaps they have the same object: I mean, they both deal with the same important, if little-known, fact of language, called connotation. Connotation is the development of a second meaning, on any sign system; the phenomenon is observed in the first text [...] and analyzed in the second [...]. It is this unity of concern that has led us to publish two very different texts together³².

³¹ Cf. Roland Barthes, *Nulový stupeň rukopisu*, *op. cit.*, p. 48; Roland Barthes, *Le Degré zéro de l’écriture (suivi de Éléments de sémiologie)*, Paris, Éditions Gonthier, 1965.

³² « Dix années séparent les deux textes qui sont réunis ici. Le premier (*Le Degré Zéro de l’Écriture* [sic]) date de 1953; c’est une réflexion libre sur la condition historique du langage littéraire [...]. Le second texte (*Éléments de Sémiologie* a paru en 1964 [...]; c’est un texte didactique [...]: on y suppose, après Saussure, l’existence d’une discipline noucelle, la sémiologie ou science des significations et l’on y décrit les concepts de la linguistique structurale qui peuvent aider à la développer; comme le structuralisme tend aujourd’hui à pénétrer dans les sciences humaines, on a pensé qu’il pouvait être utile d’en donner une terminologie raisonnée. Ces deux textes n’ont ni le même ton ni le même sujet; mails ils ont peut-être le même objet; je veux dire qu’ils traitent tous du d’un même fait de langage, important, semble-t-il, quoique mal connu, qu’on appelle connotations. La connotation est le développement d’un sens second, sur n’importe quel système de signe; le phénomène est constaté dans le premier texte [...] et analysé dans le second [...]. C’est cette unité de préoccupation qui a amené à publier ensemble deux textes bien différents. R.B. » Barthes, *Le Degré Zéro de l’écriture (suivi de Éléments de sémiologie)*, *op. cit.*, p. 5–6 (My translation).

Thus, what Barthes was doing here, was that he reread *Writing Degree Zero* through the lens of *Elements of Semiology*, thereby implying that his turning to structuralism had already taken place at the time of writing his debut, thus, in the early 1950s. While this was in tune with some of his friends and colleagues claiming that his structuralist “conversion” had already happened in 1949 when he had first encountered Greimas in Alexandria and had followed the latter’s recommendation to read Saussure, Jakobson, Hjelmslev and Brøndal,³³ it was very much at odds with his own writings that dated this turn to the second half of the 1950s³⁴ or even the mid-sixties³⁵. The Czech edition, however, happily followed this implication and, as will become clear below, even hypostasized it to an extent that made Barthes’ 1953 debut appear as an immediate successor to the work of the Prague Linguistic Circle which, despite many of its key figures emigrating or passing away years before and publications having become rather sparse, had officially ceased operations only in 1952.

The translation reproduced Barthes’ editorial commentary in full length and printed it onto the book’s dust cover, thus in a location that, as Genette reminds us, is particularly suited to feature “spectacular” [« spectaculaire »] and catchy information, that is, at once, programmatic and a marketing device³⁶. What we can gather from this is that, in 1967 Czechoslovakia, structuralism sold. Or, to put it differently, a book by a hitherto little-known French theorist was most likely to find its customers when marketed as being related to the contemporary revival of interwar structuralism.

Personal Continuities: Jiří Levý and the Making of the Czech Barthes

As I have mentioned above, *Nulový stupeň rukopisu – Základy sémiologie* was published in 1967 by Československý spisovatel [The Czechoslovak Writer], the publishing house of the country’s writers’ association. It formed part of a series called “The Workshop Edition” [Edice Dílna] which, according to some, exemplified the “gradual liberation of literary studies from the stigmas of the Stalinist period” [*postupného osvobození literární vědy od stigmat stalinistického*

³³ For Barthes’ meeting with Greimas in Alexandria see Calvet, *op cit.*, p. 121–124; see also Michel Arrivé, “Saussure, Barthes, Greimas,” *Modèles linguistiques* vol. 21–1, no. 41, 2000, p. 19–37.

³⁴ Cf. Roland Barthes in his preface to the reedition of *Mythologies*: Roland Barthes, *Œuvres complètes, vol. 1. 1942–1961*, ed. Éric Marty, Paris, Seuil, 2002, p. 673.

³⁵ Cf. Roland Barthes, *Œuvres complètes, vol., op. cit.* p. 718–719.

³⁶ Gérard Genette, *Seuils*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 2007, p. 32.

období]³⁷. Founded in 1959, its early volumes were still very much in line with the official theoretical premises of the fifties, including, among others, Milan Kundera’s early and very much Stalinist version of *The Art of the Novel* [*Umění románu*, 1960]³⁸. Over the course of the sixties, though, it would include more and more translations, such as Garaudy’s *Realism Without Borders* [*Réalisme sans Rivage; Realismus bez břehu*, 1965] or Bakhtin’s Dostoyevsky book³⁹ as well as structuralist writings by local authors⁴⁰. Right before it was upended for political reasons in 1971, the series would even feature a translation of Lévi-Strauss’ *The Savage Mind* [*La pensée sauvage; Myšlení přírodních národů*, 1971]⁴¹.

At first glance, *Nulový stupeň rukopisu – Základy sémiologie* was the work of three people. The first one was Josef Čermák who was responsible for translating *Writing Degree Zero*. Interestingly, at that time, he was primarily known as a specialist of Prague German literature and especially of Kafka. In 1963, he had contributed to Goldstücker’s famous conference in Liblice⁴². Later, he would edit Kafka’s correspondence as well as a beautifully designed collection of facsimile documents from the writer’s personal archive⁴³. In the late 1960s,

³⁷ Michal Přibáň, “Československý spisovatel,” *Slovník české literatury po roce 1945*, 2013, <https://slovníkceskeliteratury.cz/showContent.jsp?docId=1635> [May 7, 2025].

³⁸ Milan Kundera, *Umění románu: cesta Vladislava Vančury za velkou epikou*, Edice Dílna, vol. 2, Praha, Československý spisovatel, 1960.

³⁹ Roger Garaudy, *Realismus bez břehů: Picasso-Saint-John Perse-Kafka*, trans. Eva Janovcová, Jiří Kolář, and Anna Šabatková, Edice Dílna, vol. 14, Praha, Československý spisovatel, 1965; Michail Bakhtin, *Dostojevskij Umělec. K Poetice Prózy*, trans. Jiří Honzík, Edice Dílna, vol. 37, Praha, Československý spisovatel, 1971; other translated titles include Louis Aragon, *Básník a skutečnost. Výbor z literárněkritických a teoretických statí*, trans. Antonín Liehm, Petr Kopta, and Jiří Taufer, Edice Dílna, vol. 9, Praha, 1963; René Girard, *Lež romantismu a pravda románu*, trans. Anna Šabatková, Edice Dílna, vol. 32, Praha, Československý spisovatel, 1968; Roman Ingarden, *O poznávání literárního díla*, trans. Hana Jechová, Edice Dílna, vol. 30, Praha, Československý spisovatel, 1967.

⁴⁰ Zdeněk Mathauser, *Umění poezie. Vladimír Majakovskij a jeho doba*, Edice Dílna, vol. 16, Praha, Československý spisovatel, 1964; Miroslav Červenka, *Symboly, písně a mýty. Studie o proměnách českého lyrického slohu na přelomu století (Sova, Březina, Neumann, Gellner, Toman)*, Edice Dílna, vol. 22, Praha, Československý spisovatel, 1966; Zdeněk Kožmín, *Umění stylu. Úloha jazyka v současné próze*, Edice Dílna, vol. 28, Praha, Československý spisovatel, 1967.

⁴¹ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Myšlení přírodních národů*, trans. Jiří Pechar, Edice Dílna, vol. 34, Praha, Československý spisovatel, 1971.

⁴² Josef Čermák, “Zpráva o neznámých kafkovských dokumentech,” in *Franz Kafka. Liblická vědecká konference 1963*, Praha, Nakladatelství Československé akademie věd, 1963, p. 249–253.

⁴³ Josef Čermák, *Zápas jménem psaní. O životním údělu Franze Kafky*, Brno: B4U, 2009; for a German translation see Josef Čermák, “*Ich habe seit jeher einen gewissen Verdacht gegen mich*

Čermák taught at Prague's Charles University under Václav Černý, the founder of Czechoslovak comparative literature, who had been banned from teaching for political reasons in 1951 and temporarily returned to his chair between 1968 and 1970. After the invasion, Čermák, too, was banned from teaching and went on to work as an editor and later editor-in-chief at the "Odeon" publishing house, which some have considered a sort of "shadow university" due to its post-1968 systematic hiring of dismissed scholars from all areas of the humanities⁴⁴. On top of this, he translated German and French literature as well as philosophical and scholarly texts by authors such as Kafka, Sartre, and LeGoff. For Čermák, this was the first time translating Barthes. In contrast, the second translator, Josef Dubský, was a Romance scholar by training. In the 1950s and 60s he had primarily worked on questions of lexicography, although his focus was on Spanish rather than French. As we learn from documents preserved in the publisher's archive, he was appointed mostly due to his intimate knowledge of Romance linguistic terminology⁴⁵. Just like for Čermák, for Dubský, this was also the very first translational encounter with Barthes. The third name associated with the book, on the other hand, is Vladimír Mikeš who authored the afterword. Another student of Černý, he earned his living as a freelance translator of French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, and German literature. In the 1970s and 80s, he also served as a so-called *pokrývač* [lit. "roofer"], thus as someone who lent his name to others who were banned from publishing for political reasons⁴⁶.

When it comes to the question of how the translation related to the revival of interwar structuralism, this cast is thus rather unrevealing. In fact, this link is only revealed by documents preserved in the publisher's archive, thereby illustrating the value of archival materials not only for the history of theory

gebabt" : *Franz Kafka – Dokumente zu Leben und Werk*, trans. Rolf Stimmen, Berlin, Frankfurt am Main, Parthas/Stroemfeld, 2010.

⁴⁴ Josef Forbelský in *Slovo za slovem. S překladateli o překládání*, ed. Stanislav Rubáš, Praha, Academia, 2012, p. 89; see also the conversation with Josef Čermák, *idem*, p. 28–30.

⁴⁵ Letter by Jiří Levý to the editorial board of *Československý spisovatel*, April 4, 1966.

⁴⁶ For an extended discussion of this practice within the context of theory translation see Anna Förster, "A Rather Secretive Affair". Walter Benjamin in Post-1968 Czechoslovakia," in *Walter Benjamin in the European East. Networks, Conflicts, and Reception*, ed. Caroline Adler and Sophia Buck, London and New York, Routledge, forthcoming 2025; for a detailed bibliography of allonymic translation practices in post-1968 Czechoslovakia see Zdeňka Rachůnková (ed.), *Zamlčování překladatelé. Bibliografie 1948–1989*, Praha: Ivo Železný, 1992.

but also for translation history⁴⁷. For what is revealed by these documents and, particularly the publisher’s correspondence, is that there was, in fact, a crucial overlap between the actors of the structuralist renaissance and the translation of French theory. Given that these materials have never been thoroughly studied, it is hardly surprising that, so far, this connection has not yet been commented on. The person I am referring to is Jiří Levý (1926–1967), one of the key figures of the 1960s structuralist revival and the “founder of Czechoslovak translation studies”⁴⁸. A couple of years earlier, he had published his famous book *The Art of Translation* [*Umění překladau*] which, for the first time ever, applied some of the core principles of the Prague Linguistic Circle to questions of literary translation. Remarkably, this book had been published as one of the first titles of the very *Workshop* edition which later included the Barthes volume, setting both the series’ structuralist tone and its interest in translation⁴⁹. Additionally, in 1966 and again within the same series, Levý had released an anthology called *Western Literary Studies and Aesthetics* [*Západní literární věda a estetika*] which featured essays on the state of literary theory in Great Britain, USA, France, Italy, Spain, the German-speaking countries, and Scandinavia⁵⁰. In some cases, this was combined with translations of original writings viewed as representative for their respective contexts of origin. While in the Anglo-American case, this role was attributed to the early 20th century New Humanism, the Neo-Aristotelianism of the 1930s Chicago School, and the beginnings of New Criticism, the German-speaking world was represented by the war-time writings of Leo Spitzer, Erich Auerbach, and Emil Staiger. In

⁴⁷ On the significance of archival material for the historiography of theory see Danuta Ulicka, “Zwrot archiwalny: Jak ja go widzę,” *Teksty Drugie*, no. 1–2 (121–122), 2010, p. 159–64; for a similar discussion within the context of translation history see Anthony Pym, *Method in Translation History*, London and New York, Routledge, 2015, p. 5; as well as Christopher Rundle, “Historiography,” in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies*, London and New York, Routledge, 2020, p. 232–237.

⁴⁸ Ivana Kupková et al., *Jiří Levý. Zakladatel Československé Translatologie*, Brno, Masarykova univerzita, 2019.

⁴⁹ Jiří Levý, *Umění Překladau*, Edice Dílna, vol. 10, Praha: Československý spisovatel, 1963. Very soon after being released, the book was translated into German; an English translation, however, was published only four decades later. Cf. Jiří Levý, *Die literarische Übersetzung. Theorie einer Kunstgattung*, trans. Walter Schamschula, Frankfurt am Main, Athenäum, 1969; Jiří Levý, *The Art of Translation*, ed. Zuzana Jettmarová, trans. Patrick Corness, Amsterdam, John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2011.

⁵⁰ Jiří Levý (ed.), *Západní literární věda a estetika*, Edice Dílna, vol. 22, Praha, Československý spisovatel, 1966.

the French case, on the other hand, the choice fell onto no one else but Roland Barthes and a translation of his 1963 piece “The two criticism” [« Les deux critiques »] which would later be included in his *Critical Essays*⁵¹.

This choice is significant in so far, as it demonstrates that in mid-1960s Czechoslovakia, French theory was addressed in geopolitical rather than in national or topical terms. It remains unclear whether this was Levý's own choice or a concession to the publisher's internal censorship authorities which would not be abandoned until two years later, in April 1968. In any case, Levý justified this decision by explaining that the main goal of the anthology was to grant access to theoretical contexts Czechoslovak literary theory had lost contact with “practically before World War II” [*prakticky před druhou světovou válkou*]⁵². On the other hand, though, Levý's choice of texts is remarkable for it shows that, while the Anglosaxons, Germans, and Italians were represented mostly by pre-war and, thus, *past* writings, theory's *present* and future were clearly identified with France. And, most importantly, with Roland Barthes whose intellectual trajectory was presented as possessing almost predictive qualities. As Levý wrote:

from critical interpretations of certain tendencies of French literature [...] through a rational analysis of myths [...], he [i.e. Barthes] has moved on to a structural conception of the literary work [...] and in recent years to a semiological analysis of art [...]; I believe that this is the developmental direction that all methodologically progressive literary science will take⁵³.

This positioning was further developed and specified in an essay called “Czechoslovak Structuralism and its International Context” [*Československý strukturalismus a zahraniční kontext*] in which Levý returned both to the New Humanism, the Chicago School, and early New Criticism and to French structuralism. But while the former three were conceptualized as contemporaries of the Prague Linguistic Circle, the latter was very much addressed as “another

⁵¹ Roland Barthes, “Dvě kritiky,” *op. cit.*, p. 205–210.

⁵² Jiří Levý, “Úvodem,” *op. cit.*, p. 7.

⁵³ “od kritických interpretací některých tendencí francouzské literatur [...] přes racionální analýzu mýtů [...] přešel ke strukturnímu pojetí literárního díla [...] a v posledních letech k sémiologické analýze umění [...]; domnívám se, že to je vývojový směr, kterým bude procházet celá metodologicky progresivní literární věda.“ Jiří Levý, “K metodologické situaci a pracovním výsledkům západní literární vědy”, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

developmental stage” [*další vývojov[á] etap[a]*] of what had begun in Prague almost four decades earlier⁵⁴. It is important to note that this paper was published nowhere else than in *Structure and Meaning of the Literary Work* [*Struktura a smysl literárního díla*], the 1966 festschrift for Mukařovský that marked the return of structuralism into public discourse. It is, thus, appropriate to claim that this take on French structuralism was very much representative for mid-1960s Czechoslovak structuralist literary studies as a whole. This also applies, again, to the central role that was being attributed to Roland Barthes. According to this reading, his work demonstrated in an exemplary manner how, under different and more favorable historical and political circumstances, Czechoslovak structuralism itself would have most likely further developed⁵⁵. Engaging with and translating Roland Barthes was, thus, essentially perceived as contributing to a counterfactual history of domestic theory.

As I argue, this is the background against which Levý’s involvement in the making of *Nulový stupeň rukopisu* is to be considered. As we can gather from the archival materials, it was thanks to him that the editors of the *Workshop* series first came into contact with Barthes’ writings. He was also responsible for the decision to translate not only *Writing Degree Zero* but to combine it with the more recent and scientific *Elements of Semiology*⁵⁶. As we will see below, this retrospectively bestowed the earlier text with the very qualities that were seen as proving the historical continuity between the work of the Prague Linguistic Circle and French structuralism. In addition, Levý was the one who mediated the contacts between the publisher and the translators and—drawing upon his own personal library—provided them with the source text as well as with other writings by Barthes⁵⁷. Also, throughout the entire translation process, he functioned as a theoretical and terminological advisor⁵⁸. And, if it had not been for his unexpected death in early 1967, he would have also been responsible for the final assessment of the translation⁵⁹.

⁵⁴ Jiří Levý, “Československý strukturalismus a zahraniční kontext,” in *Struktura a smysl literárního díla*, ed. Felix Vodička, Milan Jankovič, and Zdeněk Pešat, Praha, 1966, p. 58–69.

⁵⁵ Cf. *idem*, p. 62.

⁵⁶ Cf. Letter by Bohumil Dolžal to Jiří Levý, May 2, 1966.

⁵⁷ Cf. *ibid*; see also letter by Bohumil Doležel to Josef Dubský, May 2, 1966

⁵⁸ Cf., for example, letter by Otakar Mohyla [?, signature illegible] to Jiří Levý, January 11, 1967.

⁵⁹ Levý passed away only six days after Československý spisovatel had mailed him the finished manuscript. Even though the print release would not be issued until mid-October, the publisher was unable to find another competent reviewer; the final assessment was, thus, conducted internally. Given that Mikeš was commissioned with the writing of the afterword only in March, it is

Mobilizing Historical Terminology

Unsurprisingly, all of this was not without consequence for Čermák's and Dubský's translational work and especially for their treatment of Barthes' terminology. Unlike the case of many other languages at the time, translating French structuralist writings into Central European languages and, especially into Czech, meant that translators were able to revert to an established terminological repertoire that was not only preexisting but also drew on the same authors and source texts as the French structuralist theory of the 1960s. Besides Russian Formalism, the most important ones were, of course, Saussure and his *Course in General Linguistics*. Surprisingly, a complete translation of the *Course* into Czech was not published until 1989, thus, much later than, for instance its German, English, Polish, or Italian versions⁶⁰. This was probably due to the Prague Linguistic Circle's multilingual character and the central role the group attributed to French⁶¹. This did not mean, of course, that other languages were not used at all. In fact, most of the internal, especially

likely that this task had been originally meant to fall onto Levý, too. Cf. *ibid*; see also the contract between Československý spisovatel and Vladimír Mikeš, signed March 30, 1967; the final review by Doležal, undated; as well as the formal issuing of the print release, dated October 18, 1967.

⁶⁰ Ferdinand de Saussure, *Grundfragen der allgemeinen Sprachwissenschaft*, ed. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, trans. Hermann Lommel, Berlin, W. De Gruyter & Co., 1931; Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, ed. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, trans. Wade Baskin, New York, Philosophical Library, 1959; Ferdinand de Saussure, *Kurs językoznawstwa Ogólnego*, ed. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, trans. Krystyna Kasprzyk, Warszawa, Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1961; Ferdinand de Saussure, *Corso di linguistica generale*, ed. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, trans. Tullio di Mauro, Bari, Editori Laterza, 1967; Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, ed. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, trans. Roy Harris, London: Duckworth, 1983. Interestingly, though, the very first translation of the *Cours* was published neither in Europe nor in North America but in Japan in 1928. A Russian translation was prepared in 1922 within the context of the Moscow Linguistic Circle. Due to disagreements with Bally and Sechehaye, however, it was never finished and a retranslation was eventually published in 1933. Cf. Asuka Matsumoto, « Traductions japonaises de la terminologie linguistique dans le Cours de linguistique générale – les rapports entre langage/langue/parole, parole/parlant/parlé et phonation/articulation », p. 50–76 as well as Cathérine Genty-Depretto, « Une page inédite de l'histoire de la linguistique. La première traduction russe du Cours de linguistique générale de Ferdinand de Saussure », *Revue des études slaves*, vol. 54, no. 4, 1982, p. 757–762.

⁶¹ For the linguistic diversity of the Prague Linguistic Circle and the internal distribution of its various working languages see Klaas-Hinrich Ehlers, "Deutsch und Französisch als tschechische Wissenschaftssprachen in der Ersten Republik: Die Sprachen des Prager Linguistik-Zirkels. Kurt Kropol Zum 65. Geburtstag," *Brücken. Neue Folge*, vol. 4, 1996, p. 105–133.

in-person communication between the members happened in Czech. When it came to communicating across language barriers, though, for many of the local members as well as their immigrant colleagues of Soviet origin, German was a much more natural choice. And English, too, played a considerable role, not least because some of the founding members had an academic background in English studies⁶². French, however, served as the institutional written language of the Circle and, most importantly, was chosen for its internationally renowned journal *Travaux linguistiques du Cercle de Prague* which was founded in 1929. Accordingly, the engagement with Saussure’s terminology and the question of how to adapt it to the needs of local linguistics and literary studies did not happen all that much on the level of actual translation but within the Circles’ Czech-language publications. In the case of Barthes, another important source shared with the Prague Linguistic Circle was the work of the Copenhagen group and, especially, of Hjelmslev and Brøndal⁶³.

When it came to translating Roland Barthes in the 1960s, the consequence of this pre-existing vocabulary was twofold. On the one hand, compared to other countries and languages, translation was much easier for there was fewer need to coin new terms or to revert to commentary operations meant to compensate for gaps in the theoretical lexicon. Even if this later changed under the influence of poststructuralism and, especially, deconstruction, initially, in the 1960s, this led to a translation practice that was very different from the one that Barthes’ writings became known for, most importantly, in the Anglophone world. There, his writings from the 1950s and 60s were the first ones to undergo a process of significant translatory exoticization aimed at underlining their conceptual novelty by highlighting their Frenchness⁶⁴. A very similar situation occurred in Germany where Barthes’ writings began to be translated even earlier, in the late 1950s⁶⁵. However, as one of his translators would later recall, the exoticized language of Barthes’ writings remained strangely “unrelated” [*beziehungslos*] to local discourse at least until the late 1960s or early 70s⁶⁶. For some, these

⁶² This applied, most importantly, to Vilém Mathesius, but also to the linguist Bohumil Trnka. Levý, too, had originally graduated with a degree in both Czech and English literature and linguistics.

⁶³ Cf., for instance, Vladimír Skalička, “Kodaňský Strukturalismus a ‘Pražská Škola,’” *Slovo a slovesnost*, vol 10, no. 3, 1948, p. 135–142.

⁶⁴ Cf., among others, Cusset, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

⁶⁵ Roland Barthes, *Am Nullpunkt der Literatur. Objektive Literatur. Zwei Essays*, trans. Helmut Scheffel, Hamburg, Claassen, 1959.

⁶⁶ Horst Brühmann, “Als Diskussionsgrundlage für Großstadtbüchereien empfohlen. Zu

early translations even read as if they were not German at all but written in a hermetic “French theorese” [*Franzosen-theoretisch*] that “suggests a mysterious in-between-thinking that does not say exactly what it means, and at the same time lets us suspect that it can only say what it means as something that remains unsaid”⁶⁷.

The Czech translators, however, were able to translate Barthes’ early writings in a way that made them blend in almost seamlessly with the renewed local structuralist discourse. While this did not mean that Czech scholars agreed with everything Barthes came up with—there was significant disagreement, for instance, with his notions of structure and signification⁶⁸—it did mean that, instead of dwelling on his language and style, the debate went straight to the conceptual level of his writings. On the other hand, though, this also meant that some of the actually existing peculiarities of his early writings were largely overlooked. This applied, most importantly, to the very peculiar way he engaged with the terminological apparatus of structural linguistics. Let’s remember, for an instant, the scathing criticism his early writings had received from French academic linguistics. The most prominent—and brutal—statement in this regard came from the linguist Georges Mounin who dedicated an entire chapter of his 1970 book *Introduction to Semiology* [*Introduction à la sémiologie*] to the analysis of Barthes’ terminology⁶⁹. In the 1950s, Mounin claimed, Barthes had lacked any understanding of even the most basic concepts of structural linguistics like “language” and “sign,” let alone more specific ones such as the Saussurean differentiation between « langue » and « parole » or “signifier” and “signified” or Hjelmslev’s dichotomy of “denotation” and “connotation”. Barthes’ use of these terms, Mounin said, was a “linguistic decalcomania” that essentially resembled the crafting technique by which engravings or prints are transferred from one material to the other as well as the related surrealist practice aimed at producing more or less random surfaces and structures of paint⁷⁰.

Übersetzung und Rezeption der Mythen des Alltags in Deutschland,” in *Mythen des Alltags – Mythologies. Roland Barthes’ Klassiker der Kulturwissenschaften*, ed. Mona Körte and Anne-Kathrin Reulecke, Berlin, Kadmos, 2014, p. 32.

⁶⁷ Lothar Baier, *Französische Zustände. Berichte Und Essays*, Frankfurt am Main, Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1982, p. 23.

⁶⁸ See for example Julie Štěpánková, “O strukturaci v současném strukturalismu francouzském a ve strukturalismu českém,” *Česká literatura* vol. 16, no. 5, 1968, p. 588–589.

⁶⁹ Cf. Georges Mounin, « La Sémiologie de Roland Barthes », in *Introduction à la sémiologie*, Paris, Les Éditions du Minuit, 1970, p. 189–198.

⁷⁰ *Idem*, p. 196.

With regard to the 1960s and, in particular, to *Elements of Semiology*, Mounin did at least acknowledge Barthes’ efforts to close these gaps and to catch up on basic linguistic knowledge. However, for him, the result still resembled a “terminological [...] thicket” [maquis [...] terminologique] rather than a proper use of structuralist linguistic and semiological vocabulary⁷¹. Similar albeit less polemical comments were made, among others, by Paul de Man⁷². Later, Barthes’ peculiar use of linguistic terminology would be perceived much more favorably and viewed less as a lack of knowledge or a conceptual weakness but as a deliberate attempt to de-dogmatize structuralism. Referencing his idea of the myth as a “stolen language,” it would come to be seen as a creative “theft” of sorts, a repurposing of linguistic terminology with the goal of creating a myth of scientificity⁷³.

Czechoslovak linguists and literary scholars, on the other hand, did not seem to notice these peculiarities at all. And as I argue, this was precisely due to the translators’ confidence in terminologically assimilating Barthes into domestic structuralist discourse. Let me illustrate this by drawing on two examples. The first one has to do with how they treated Barthes’ use of Saussurean terminology and, especially, of his famous triad « langage »/« langue »/« parole ». In *Writing Degree Zero*, all three show up and can be understood as traces of Barthes’ earliest structuralist readings. In terms of conceptual meaning, however, they do mostly not correspond to their respective Saussurean definitions. Let’s take a look at a passage from *Writing Degree Zero*, taken from its first chapter “What is Writing?”. For clarity’s sake I, will first quote the French original together with its English translation by Annette Lavers and Colin Smith:

[T]oute Forme est aussi Valeur; c’est pourquoi entra *la langue* et le style, il y a place pour une autre réalité formelle: l’écriture. Dans n’importe quelle forme littéraire, il y a le choix général d’un ton, d’un éthos, si l’on veut, et c’est ici précisément que l’écrivain s’individualise clairement parce que c’est ici qu’il s’engage. *Langue* et style sont des données antécédents à toute problématique du *langage*, *langue* et style sont le produit naturel du Temps et de la personne biologique; mais l’identité

⁷¹ *Ibidem*.

⁷² Paul De Man, “Roland Barthes and the Limits of Structuralism,” *Yale French Studies*, no. 77, 1972 1990, p. 177–90.

⁷³ Cf. Bettina Lindorfer, “Mythen des Zeichens. Zur ‘ersten Semiologie’ bei Roland Barthes,” in *Mythen Des Alltags – Mythologies*, op. cit., p. 25–40.

formelle de l'écrivain ne s'établit véritablement qu'en dehors de l'installation des normes de la grammaire et des constantes du style, là où le continu écrit, rassemblé et enfermé d'abord dans une nature linguistique parfaitement innocente, va devenir enfin un signe total, le choix d'un comportement humain, l'affirmation d'un certain Bien, s'engageant ainsi l'écrivain dans l'évidence et la communication d'un bonheur ou d'un malaise, et liant la forme à la fois normale et singulière de sa *parole* à la vaste Histoire d'autrui. *Langue* et style sont des forces aveugles; l'écriture est un acte de solidarité historique. *Langue* et style sont des objets; l'écriture est une fonction: elle est le rapport entre la création et la société, elle est le langage littéraire transformé par sa destination sociale, elle est la forme saisie dans son intention humaine et liée ainsi aux grandes crises de l'Histoire⁷⁴.

[E]very Form is also a Value, which is why there is room, between a *language* and a style, for another formal reality: writing. Within any literary form, there is a general choice of tone, of ethos, if you like, and this is precisely where the writer shows himself clearly as an individual because this is where he commits himself. A *language* and a style are data prior to all the problematics of *language*, they are the natural product of Time and of the person as a biological entity; but the formal identity of the writer is truly established only outside the permanence of grammatical norms and stylistic constants, where the written continuum, first collected and enclosed within a perfectly innocent linguistic nature, at last becomes a total sign, the choice of a human attitude, the affirmation of a certain Good. It thus commits the writer to manifest and communicate a state of happiness or malaise, and links the form of his *utterance*, which is at once normal and singular, to the vast History of others. A language and a style are blind forces; a mode of writing is an act of historical solidarity⁷⁵.

The « langue » this passage addresses and brings into polar opposition with “style” has very little in common with Saussure’s differentiation between language as a system of rules (« langue ») and this system’s concrete realization (« parole »). This is even more apparent as Barthes famously complements this binary with a third term—« écriture »—located half-way between « langue » and “style”. « [P]arole », too, makes an appearance in this passage, although, again, not so much in a Saussurean sense but with a somewhat narrower meaning, implying something like an individual or singular act of speech. The same applies

⁷⁴ Barthes, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 1., *op. cit.* p. 179–80; italics are mine.

⁷⁵ Roland Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*, translated by Annette Lavers and Colin Smith, New York, Hill and Wang, 1967, p. 179–80.

to « langage ». While for Saussure, it denotes the human faculty of speech, here, it is used as an overarching term for « langue », “style,” and « écriture ».

As we can tell by the above quote, Barthes’ Anglophone translators Annette Lavers and Colin Smith do not at all read his vocabulary as being of Saussurean provenance. Or at least, as Lavers herself would later put it, they take its Saussurean ring “with a pinch of salt”⁷⁶. This leads them to not even bother to differentiate between « langage » and « langue », translating them invariably as « langage », whereas contemporary translations of Saussure’s *Cours* would have suggested to render « langue » as “language” and « parole » as “speaking”⁷⁷. « Parole », on the other hand, is translated as “utterance” which, to use somewhat Hjelmsevan terms, comes relatively close to the denotative meaning of Barthes’ text but deletes all of the original term’s Saussurean connotation. One could cite many other examples for this, but the effect would always remain the same: this “de-Saussureanation” consequently prevents the Anglophone *Writing Degree Zero* from being read as an early structuralist text⁷⁸.

⁷⁶ Annette Lavers, *Roland Barthes. Structuralism and After*, London, Methuen & Co, 1982, p. 52.

⁷⁷ Cf. Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, 1959, *op. cit.*, among others p. 9, 13; a second translation was published in 1983 by Roy Harris, rendering « parole » as “speech” while using explanatory solutions such as “linguistic structure” or “language” as a structured system’ for « langue ». The difference between « langue » and « langage », on the other hand, was indicated by a varying use of direct, indirect, and zero articles. Cf. Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, 1983, *op. cit.* For a comparison of both translations see Carol Sanders, “Saussure Translated,” *Historiographia Linguistica* vol. 27, no. 2–3, 2000, p. 345–58.

⁷⁸ A similar tendency can be observed in the 1959 German translation by Helmut Scheffel. There, the passage I have quoted above reads as follows: “Jede Form ist [...] auch ein Wert; deshalb besteht zwischen Sprache und Stil noch Raum für eine andere formale Realität: für die ‘Schreibweise’. In jeder beliebigen literarischen Form findet sich die allgemeine Wahl eines Tones, oder wenn man so will: eines Ethos, und hier individualisiert sich ein Schriftsteller eindeutig, denn hier engagiert er sich. Sprache und Stil liegen vor aller Problematik der persönlichen Ausdrucksweise. Sprache und Stil sind das natürliche Produkt der Zeit und der biologischen Person. Die formale Identität des Schriftstellers entfaltet sich wirkliche erst außerhalb der installierten grammatischen Normen und der Konstanten des Stils, dort, wo das geschriebene Ganze, das zunächst in einer sprachlich völlig unschuldigen Form zusammengefaßt ist, endlich zu einem totalen Zeichen wir, zu einer Wahl einer menschlichen Verhaltensweise, zur Affirmation eines bestimmten Gutes, den Schriftsteller engagierend, ein Glück oder ein Unbehagen evident zu machen oder mitzuteilen und gleichzeitig die sowohl normale als auch einmalige Form seines Sprechens an die weite Geschichte der anderen bindend. Sprache und Stil sind blinde Kräfte, die Schreibweise ist ein Akt historischer Solidarität [...]” Roland Barthes, *Am Nullpunkt der Literatur*, trans. Helmut Scheffel, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1982, p. 20.

In contrast to this, the Czech translation takes the opposite approach and very much turns the peculiar vocabulary of *Writing Degree Zero* into an orthodoxly structuralist terminology. There, the passage in question reads as follows:

[K]aždá forma je též hodnotou; proto je mezi *jazykem* a stylem místo pro jinou formální realitu: pro rukopis. V kterékoli literární formě je obecný výběr tónu, étosu, chcete-li, a právě zde se spisovatel jasně individualizuje, protože právě zde se angažuje. *Jazyk* a styl jsou danosti předcházející veškerou problematiku *řeči*, jazyk a styl jsou přirozeným produktem času a biologické osoby; avšak formální identita spisovatele opravdu vzniká až mimo stanovené gramatické normy a stylové konstanty, tam, kde se souvislost, napsaná, shromážděná a uzavřená nejprve ve zcela nevině lingvistické přirozenosti, stane nakonec úplným znakem, volbou lidského postoje, přitakáním jistému Dobru, zavazujíc tak spisovatele k evidentnosti a k sdělování štěstí nebo znepokojení a spojujíc formu jeho *promluvy*, normální a zároveň zvláštní, s rozhlehlou historií druhých lidí. *Jazyk* a styl jsou slepé síly; rukopis je akt historické solidarity⁷⁹.

If we were to retranslate this back into English, we would arrive at something like this:

[E]very form is also a value; therefore, there is room for another formal relation between *language* [« langue »] and style: writing [« écriture »]. In any literary form, there is a general choice of tone, of ethos, if you like, and it is here that the writer clearly individuates himself, because it is here that he engages. *Language* [« langue »] and style are givens prior to all issues of *human language* [« langage »]; *language* [« langue »] and style are the natural product of time and the biological person; but the formal identity of the writer really comes into being only outside the established grammatical norms and stylistic statements, where the context, written, collected, and enclosed at first in a quite innocent linguistic nature, becomes finally a complete sign, a choice of human attitude, an adherence to a certain Good, thus committing the writer to obviousness and to the communication of happiness or concern, and connecting the form of his *speech* [« parole »], normal and strange at the same time, with the vast history of other people. *Language* [« langue »] and style are blind forces; writing [« écriture »] is an act of historical solidarity.

⁷⁹ Barthes, *Nulový stupeň rukopisu*, *op. cit.*, p. 15–16.

If we look at the 1930s and 40s Czech-language writings of the Prague Linguistic Circle, we are presented with a very clear terminological apparatus. « Langue » was unanimously translated as ‘jazyk’, which was also the common language equivalent of “language,” while « parole » usually oscillated between “mluva” and “promluva”⁸⁰. The former denotes both the general ability to use language and spoken discourse in general⁸¹, while “promluva” may refer more specifically to an individual act of speech⁸². The hyperonymous « langue », on the other hand, was habitually replaced by the word “řeč,” which is partially synonymous with “mluva” but has a somewhat broader semantic range, at least in every-day language⁸³.

When translating *Writing Degree Zero*, Čermák very much reverted to this Saussurean terminology—and as we can tell by the passage quoted above and especially by comparing it to Lavers’ and Smith’s translation, he did so even in places where the source text considerably deviated from the Saussurean definition of those terms. So, for instance, when Lavers and Smith translated Barthes « parole » as “utterance” instead of as “speech,” Čermák reverted to “promluva,” thereby explicitly mobilizing the codified Saussurean lexicon. And—to name another example—while the Anglophone translators subsumed Barthes’ peculiar use of « langue » under an indistinguishable but ubiquitous “language,” their Czech colleagues opted for “řeč,” thereby reasserting not only the Saussurean connotation but also directly linking Barthes to the terminological apparatus of historical, interwar structuralism. Because as the linguist Eva Macháčková has pointed out, after World War II, “řeč” had been increasingly used not as an equivalent to « langue » but to « parole ». The most likely explanation for this was the increasing influence of Russian within Czechoslovak academia, for, in Russian, the Saussurean « parole » had always been translated as речи [“řeč”]⁸⁴. This is particularly interesting, for it means that

⁸⁰ Cf. Eva Macháčková, “O Názorech Na Dichotomii Langue a Parole (K Vývoji Pojetí Některých Základních Lingvistických Pojmů a Termínů),” *Slovo a slovesnost*, vol. 48, no. 3, 1987, p. 232–39; Eva Macháčková, “O Názorech Na Dichotomii Langue a Parole (2. Část) (K Vývoji Pojetí Některých Základních Lingvistických Pojmů a Termínů),” *Slovo a slovesnost*, vol. 50, no. 1, 1989, p. 56–65.

⁸¹ “Mluva,” in *Slovník Spisovného Jazyka České (Ústav pro český jazyk, 2011)*, <https://ssjc.ujc.cas.cz/search.php?hledaj=Hledat&heslo=mluva&sti=EMPTY&where=hesla&hsubstr=no> (May 7, 2025).

⁸² “Promluva,” *idem*.

⁸³ “Řeč,” *idem*.

⁸⁴ Macháčková, “O Názorech Na Dichotomii Langue a Parole (K Vývoji Pojetí Některých Základních Lingvistických Pojmů a Termínů),” *op. cit.*, p. 237. For a reverse case in which the

Čermák's translation deliberately conducted a sort of terminological archeology that used Barthes to recover the historical vocabulary of domestic structuralism.

Écriture, Rukopis and the Semantic Gesture

The second example I would like to draw on to illustrate how the discursive and editorial framing of *Nulový stupeň rukopisu – Základy sémiologie* interplayed with the actual work of the translators is closely linked to this very archeological quality. Unlike the previous example, however, it plays out much more on the level of reception and the discussion engendered by the translators' strategies. In April 1968, thus, a couple of months after the translation's release and simultaneously with the abolition of censorship by the Dubček government, the Jan Evangelista Purkyně University in the Moravian city of Brno—today's Masaryk University—hosted a conference aimed at discussing the relationship between “Structuralism and Historism in 20th Century Philosophy” [“Strukturalismus a historismus ve fe filosofii 20. Století”]⁸⁵. Despite this title, the majority of the contributions as well as the “very animated” [“velmi animované”] discussions they were followed by evolved around the recent revival of domestic structuralism and its meaning for Czech philosophy⁸⁶. This was a particularly pressing topic since, other than in post-war France—and, interestingly, in Slovakia as well—the local structuralism of the interwar period had remained mostly within the disciplinary realm of linguistics, literary studies, and aesthetics, hardly spilling over into the social sciences and philosophy at large. Hence, what was at stake was the very possibility of going beyond a simple recovery of the past and actually taking local structuralist theorizing into a new, decidedly transdisciplinary direction that would also leave room for an exchange with Marxism. Most importantly, however, this new and broadly understood structuralist discussion was thought to actively communicate with

Czech “mluva” influenced the Ukrainian linguistic vocabulary cf. Lesya Kopran, “Difficultés d'interprétation des termes de F. de Saussure en ukrainien et en russe,” in *La Terminologie de Ferdinand de Saussure En Traduction*, *op. cit.*, p. 32–49.

⁸⁵ For contemporary reporting on the conference see Julie Štěpánková, “O Strukturalismu a Historismu ve Filosofii 20. Století,” *Česká literatura*, vol. 16, no. 5, 1968, p. 587–88 and Ivan Hodonský, “Konference o Strukturalismu,” *Sborník prací Filozofické fakulty brněnské univerzity*, B 54, *Studia philosophica*, 1969, p. 118–20. See also retrospectively Jan Zouhar, “Konference o strukturalismu a historismu v roce 1968,” *Sborník prací Filozofické fakulty brněnské univerzity*, B 54, *Studia philosophica*, 2007, p. 85–90.

⁸⁶ Štěpánková, “O strukturalismu a historismu ve filosofii 20. století,” *op. cit.*, p. 587.

contemporary theory debates abroad. In many ways, this conference therefore represented not only the climax of the “recovered” [“oživený”] structuralism but also the potential onset of something new, be it, as Chvatík put it, a “dialectical structurology” [“dialektische Strukturologie”]⁸⁷ or, as promised by another participant and translator of Roland Barthes, Julie Štěpánková⁸⁸, with reference to Derrida, a “criticology” [“kritikologie”] that would already de-center the notion of the structure⁸⁹. Since only four months later, the country would be invaded by the Warsaw Pact armies, this would remain mostly unrealized.

For now, though, several of the contributions explicitly discussed recent theoretical developments in France and Italy, including publications by Lévi-Strauss, Althusser, and Barthes⁹⁰. One of these contributions is of particular interest here, for it specifically confronted the latter’s term « écriture » to the so-called “semantic gesture” [“sémantické gesto”]. This had been—to quote the German slavist Wolfgang F. Schwarz—one of the “most problematic” concepts [“einer der problematischsten Begriffe”] of historical Czechoslovak structuralism⁹¹. Coined by Jan Mukařovský, the idea had first appeared in 1938 in a paper dedicated to the poem *The Absolute Gravedigger* [*Absolutní hrobář*] by avant-garde writer Vítězslav Nezval⁹² where it had been defined as a “methodical

⁸⁷ Chvatík, *Tschechoslowakischer strukturalismus. Theorie und Geschichte*, *op. cit.*, p. 88.

⁸⁸ Štěpánková’s most important work in this regard is, without doubt, her translation of Barthes’ *Critique et vérité*. Besides this, she translated a long interview with Barthes as well as several fragments from *Essais critiques*. Cf. Roland Barthes, *Kritika a Pravda*, trans. Julie Štěpánková, *Česká literatura*, vol. 16, no. 1, 1968, p. 72–103; Roland Barthes, “Z Kritických Esejů,” trans. Julie Štěpánková, *Orientace*, vol. 2, no. 2, 1967, p. 21–28; Roland Barthes, “Rozhovor s Rolandem Barthesem. Rozmlouvá Raymond Bellour,” in *Pařížské Rozhovory o Strukturalismu*, *op. cit.*, p. 74–85.

⁸⁹ Štěpánková, “O strukturalismu a historismu ve filosofii 20. století,” *op. cit.*, p. 588.

⁹⁰ Cf. *ibidem*. Due to the political situation, only a fraction of the contributions would end up being published, distributed across various periodicals.

⁹¹ Wolfgang F. Schwarz, “Die ‘semantische Geste’—Ein brauchbares analytisches Instrument? Zur Entwicklung und Kritik eines Kernbegriffs in Mukařovskýs Literaturästhetik,” in *Prager Schule. Kontinuität und Wandel. Arbeiten zur Literaturästhetik und Poetik der Narration*, ed. by Wolfgang F. Schwarz, Frankfurt am Main, Vervuert, 1997, p. 197.

⁹² Vítězslav Nezval, *Absolutní hrobář. Básně*, Praha: František Borový, 1937. For an English translation cf. Vítězslav Nezval, *The Absolute Gravedigger*, trans. Stephan Delbos and Tereza Novická, Prague, Twisted Spoon Press, 2016; see also Anna Förster “On the Afterlife of Czech Surrealism. Vítězslav Nezval’s *The Absolute Gravedigger*, Translated by Stephan Delbos and Tereza Novická,” *Glasgow Review of Books*, 2016, <https://glasgowreviewofbooks.com/2016/12/08/on-the-afterlife-of-czech-surrealism-vitezslav-nezvals-the-absolute-gravedigger-translated-from-the-czech-by-stephan-delbos-and-tereza-novicka/> (May 7, 2025).

principle” [“metodickým principem”] that, although being “itself without concrete content, determines the character of the artwork as a meaningful construction” [“sám je bez konkrétního obsahu, určuje ráz uměleckého díla jako významové výstavby”]⁹³. Shortly thereafter, in a study dedicated to the romantic poetry of Karel Hynek Mácha, this idea was then metaphorized as an “unspecific [...] gesture by which the poet selected and merged the elements of his work into a unity of meaning” [“nespecifikované [...] gesto, jímž básník prvky svého díla vybíral a slučoval ve významovou jednotu”]⁹⁴. And, in 1940, it had eventually been connected with semantics, or, to be more specific, with an approach that bridged the gap between formal analysis and semantic meaning, and thus, between content and form⁹⁵.

When the conference was held in 1968, like so many other concepts, too, the “semantic gesture” had recently been rediscovered and discussed by some of Mukařovský’s students. One of them was the literary scholar Milan Jankovič who had used it to prove the biographical rather than theoretical hypothesis that Mukařovský’s renouncement of structuralism in 1951 had not been all that surprising, but that he had already begun to turn away from some of structuralism’s core tenets—such as the analytical separation of content and form—by the early 1940s⁹⁶. In addition to this, Jankovič had used the idea and also the metaphorical implications of the “semantic gesture” as starting points for his own concept of a dynamic and processual “occurrence of meaning” [“dění smyslu”]⁹⁷. As I have mentioned above, at the conference itself, however, the “semantic gesture” was paired primarily with Roland Barthes’ *écriture*. The comparison was conducted on the grounds of two hypotheses. Firstly, it was claimed, both concepts were born out of the same question: How can

⁹³ Jan Mukařovský, “Sémantický rozbor básnického díla: Nezvalův Absolutní Hrobár,” in *Studie II*, ed. Miroslav Červenka and Milan Jankovič, Brno, Host, 2007, p. 376.

⁹⁴ Jan Mukařovský, “Genetika Smyslů v Máchově Poezii,” in *idem*, p. 305.

⁹⁵ Cf. Jan Mukařovský, “O Jazyce Básnickém,” in *idem*, p. 16–70.

⁹⁶ Cf. Milan Jankovič, “K pojetí sémantického gesta,” *Česká literatura*, vol. 13, no. 4, 1965, p. 319–26.

⁹⁷ Cf. *idem*, p. 320. See also Jankovič’s eponymous book which, although it originated around the same time, was published only in the early 1990s. Cf. Milan Jankovič, *Dílo jako dění smyslu*, Praha, Pražská imaginace ve spolupráci s Ústavem pro českou a světovou literaturu Československé akademie věd, 1992; for this timeline see also Irina Wutsdorff, “Die Geste als Denkfigur. Dynamische Konzepte vom Werk im Prager Strukturalismus (Jan Mukařovský und Milan Jankovič) und in der Posthermeneutik (Dieter Mersch),” *Textpraxis. Digitales Journal für Philologie*, no. 2, 2018, p. 1–14, <http://www.textpraxis.net/irina-wutsdorff-die-geste-als-denkfigur> (May 7, 2025).

one mediate between, on the one hand, the structural study of literature and, on the other, the individuality of the concrete artwork or, also, the complete works of one author? And second, the author of the contribution, Miroslav Kačer—who was otherwise known primarily for his contributions to structural theater studies⁹⁸—claimed that just like Mukařovský’s concept, Barthes’ *écriture* was based on the idea of a gesture that was at once semantical and corporeal. Quoting from Čermák’s translation, he argued that the *écriture*

« derives from the meaning-making gesture of the writer ». [...] From this statement, in which the very use of the word gesture in its semiological validity is remarkable, [...] it follows that Barthes, like Mukařovský, is aware of the existence of a kind of authorial gesture that has a fundamental (and presumably unifying) meaning-generating validity for his work⁹⁹.

This statement is highly interesting given the fact that, at the time when it was uttered in 1968 and, even more so, when the text Kačer quoted—*Writing Degree Zero*—was written in the early fifties, Barthes’ idea of an *écriture* was still very far from the explicit, sometimes even erotic corporeality it would entail in later works such as *The Pleasure of the Text* [« Le plaisir du texte »] or his writings about Cy Twombly¹⁰⁰. And it was also years before Barthes himself would dwell on the polysemy of the word « *écriture* » and on the fact that at least one of its meanings pointed at a “manual gesture, as opposed to a vocal gesture” [« un geste manuel, opposé au geste vocal »]¹⁰¹. After all, in *Writing Degree Zero*, *écriture* was still very much a literary historical concept. So, where did this precocious focus on its corporeal qualities come from?

As I argue, it has everything to do with the way *écriture* was treated by Čermák’s translation. And from the way it semantically related Barthes’ *écriture* to Mukařovský’s “semantic gesture”. For Čermák—and Dubský, too, in his

⁹⁸ See, for instance, his contribution to the Mukařovský festschrift mentioned above: Miroslav Kačer, “K významové výstavbě dramatické grotesky,” in *Struktura a smyslliterárního díla*, *op. cit.*, p. 215–27.

⁹⁹ “se odvozuje od významotvorného gesta spisovatele’ [...] Z tohoto výroku, v němž je pozoruhodné již samotné použití slova gesto v sémiologické platnosti, [...] vyplývá, že i Barthes si stejně jako Mukařovský uvědomuje existenci jakéhosi autorova ‚gesta‘, které má pro jeho dílo zásadní (a patrně i jednotící) významotvornou platnost.” Miroslav Kačer, “Mukařovského ‘sémantické gesto’ a Barthesův ‘rukopis’ (*écriture*),” *Česká literatura* vol. 16, no. 5, 1968, p. 597.

¹⁰⁰ Barthes, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 4., *op. cit.*, p. 688–720.

¹⁰¹ *Idem.*, 293.

version of *Elements of Semiology*—translated « écriture » as “rukopis”. According to the *Dictionary of Written Czech* [“Slovník spisovného jazyka českého”], this word has four different meanings: 1. “handwriting” as in opposition to typewriting; 2. “manuscript,” either in the sense of a historical document or an unpublished text; 3. a piece of writing; and 4. “a way of writing characteristic of an individual” [“způsob psaní charakteristický pro jedince”]¹⁰². The latter is of particular interest here, for it not only functions literarily—in the sense of individual handwriting—but also metaphorically. In the afterword to the Barthes translation, Mikeš quotes several art-historical works that use the term “malířský rukopis”¹⁰³. While it is difficult to adequately render this in English, it might be best translated by the German phrase “künstlerische Handschrift” that refers an individual painter’s recognizable style. This is, most possibly, what motivated Kačer to associate both Barthes’ *écriture* and Mukařovský’s “semantic gesture” with the concept of the individual style [“individuální styl”]¹⁰⁴. While this comes relatively close to what Mukařovský was aiming at it is, again, not very compatible with the idea of a writer freely choosing an *écriture* in order to express their historical allegiance.

As we learn from the archival materials, not all of those involved in the making of the book agreed with the rendering of « écriture » as “rukopis”. In fact, Levý himself seems to have expressed unease, pointing to the fact that Čermák’s solution was too narrow and too static for what he himself perceived of as much more polysemous and dynamic¹⁰⁵. Instead, he preferred “psaní,” which derived from the verb “psát” [“to write”] and covered a semantic field similar to the English “writing”¹⁰⁶. Lubomír Doležal who took over the final review

¹⁰² “Rukopis” in *Slovník Spisovného Jazyka Českého*, *op. cit.* (May 7, 2025).

¹⁰³ Vladimír Mikeš, “Zapsat co nejpravdivěji,” in *Nulový stupeň rukopisu – Základy sémiologie*, *op. cit.*, p. 137.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. Kačer, “Mukařovského ‘sémantické Gesto’ a Barthesův ‘Rukopis’ (Écriture),” *op. cit.*, p. 596.

¹⁰⁵ Cf. footnote 1 in Mikeš, “Zapsat co nejpravdivěji,” *op. cit.*, p. 137. As I have mentioned above, this is the only mention of Levý in the entire publication.

¹⁰⁶ Again, this is indicated by Mikeš’s afterword. In a bibliographical footnote, he lists existing translations of Barthes’ writings into Czech, including a translation called “Nulový stupeň psaní” [*Degree zero of writing*] which seems to have been authored by Levý himself. Since the publication date listed is prior to the release of *Écriture degré zéro*, this is, most probably, a translation of the eponymous paragraph of Barthes’ article „Reflection on the style of “The Stranger” [« Réflexion sur le style de ‚L’Étranger’ »] which had been published in the journal *Existences* back in 1944. Mikeš lists the translation as having appeared in *Dialog*, an internal newsletter issued by the translators’ section of the Czechoslovak writers’ association. Due to its

of the manuscript after Levý's passing even suggested consulting translations of *Writing Degree Zero* into other languages. The 1959 German translation in particular seemed to be a point of reference, for Doležal suggested to replace “rukopis” with “způsob psaní” [“way of writing”] which was obviously modeled on Helmut Scheffel's German translation of « écriture » as “Schreibweise”¹⁰⁷. This suggestion also came up at the Brno conference, with Kačer admitting that, when it came to translating this key term, “[t]he Germans [...] do a better job” [“jsou na tom [lépe]”]¹⁰⁸. Interestingly, German translations of Barthes' works would remain a permanent reference point even when Barthes would be translated in samizdat journals and editions and in the 1970s and 80s¹⁰⁹. For the time being, however, Čermák's translational solution very much set the tone of the debate and determined the overall historicizing register Barthes' work would be discussed within. This only changed in the 1990s when, under the influence of the gradual translation of Derrida, Levý's original suggestion—“psaní”—did indeed become the go-to equivalent for « écriture »¹¹⁰.

To sum this up, on a historical level, there are at least two things we can gather from this. First of all, other than has been stated, so far, by Czech literary scholars and historians of science alike, the “recovery” interwar Czechoslovak structuralism underwent in the wake of the Prague Spring was far from being separate from the simultaneous reception of French structuralist writings. Quite the contrary: the two of them were closely intertwined both conceptually and in terms of people involved. And second, the most important proof is the involvement of Jiří Levý, who, as I argue above, should be reconsidered not only as the founder of Czechoslovak translation studies but also as a key figure of the history of French theory and its translation in Central Europe. On a more general, systematic level, however, the most important insight is,

semi-official or ‘grey’ nature, this publication has been collected neither by the Czechoslovak National Library nor by samizdat archives such as Libri prohibiti in Prague. I have, thus, not been able to verify this. Cf. *ibidem*. For Barthes' 1944 article, see Barthes, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 1, *op. cit.*, p. 75–79.

¹⁰⁷ Cf. Bohumil Doležal: final assessment, undated, 1.

¹⁰⁸ Kačer, “Mukařovského ‘sémantické Gesto’ a Barthesův ‘Rukopis’ (Écriture),” *op. cit.*, p. 595.

¹⁰⁹ On translations of Barthes in Czech samizdat see Anna Förster, “Spielplätze der Theorie,” *Mitropa*, no. 22, 2023, p. 154–56 as well as Anna Förster, “Aus der Philologie ein Fest machen. Hrabals Barthes-Lektüren der 1980er Jahre,” in *Der Schriftsteller als Philologe. Bohumil Hrabal, Jaroslav Hašek und die Philologie*, Würzburg, Königshausen & Neumann, 2020, p. 215–311.

¹¹⁰ See, for instance Zdeněk Hrbata, « Écriture », in *Slovník Literárněvědného Strukturalismu*, ed. Ondřej Sládek, Brno, Host, 2018, p. 181–83.

without doubt, that, besides being used to recover the history of a theoretical source text or body of theory, translation can also serve as a means to recover the theoretical past of the receiving context. As we have seen, besides paratextual framing, the most important playing field for this is terminology or, to be more precise, a specific kind of terminological archeology by which translators access and revive historical theoretical vocabulary.

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DIALECTIQUE DE L'ÉCRITURE KUNDÉRIENNE : BOHÈME – FRANCE, 1968–2014

Ana-Maria Dumitrașcu*

The Dialectic of Kundera's Writing: Bohemia and France, 1968–2014

Abstract: This article explores the way in which Milan Kundera problematises and reconfigures the dynamics of cultural and literary synchronisation between France — traditionally conceived as a “cultural centre” — and Central Europe, with particular attention to Czech literature, which is often relegated to the periphery. Through a close analysis of Kundera's texts, we examine the modalities of literary expression that both articulate and contest the East–West dichotomy, situating them within the broader framework of deferred synchronisation, while also interrogating the underlying ideological, political, and cultural mechanisms and their fictional representations. By traversing and unsettling these oppositions, we aim to demonstrate that fiction functions as a critical space for renegotiating hierarchical cultural relationships—often marked by tension, irony, and ambivalence. The periphery emerges not merely as a site of literary innovation, but also as a reflective counterpoint to the dominant cultural narratives of the centre. Rather than advocating for the simple incorporation of the periphery into the dominant paradigm, Kundera—drawing on the legacy of Kafka—develops a poetics of desynchronisation, wherein marginality serves as a powerful critical vantage point. In doing so, he interrogates and redefines cultural hierarchies in Europe, while presciently engaging with the dynamics of globalised cultural capital.

Keywords: deferred synchronisation, East–West dichotomy, aesthetic dissonance, critical marginality, decentralization.

Introduction

Les notions de centre et de périphérie, largement utilisées dans les sciences humaines et sociales, désignent une relation asymétrique entre des espaces

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ou des instances pourvus de statuts inégaux, qu'ils soient géographiques, culturels, symboliques ou politiques. Dérivée initialement des théories du développement formulées par des auteurs comme Raúl Prebisch¹ ou Immanuel Wallerstein², la dichotomie centre-périphérie a été reprise et radicalisée dans les études postcoloniales, notamment par Edward Said³ et Homi K. Bhabha⁴, pour interroger les rapports de domination symbolique et culturelle hérités de la colonisation. Dans le champ littéraire, cette dichotomie, bien qu'issue des sciences sociales et des théories du développement, a trouvé une résonance particulière dans les études littéraires, notamment à travers les travaux sur la mondialisation des lettres et les rapports entre littératures « majeures » et « mineures », que témoignent les analyses de Pascale Casanova⁵ dans *La République mondiale des lettres* (1999), la réflexion de Franco Moretti⁶ sur les asymétries entre les espaces culturels « centraux » et « périphériques » dans “Conjectures on World Literature” (2000), ou encore la conceptualisation de la « littérature mineure » par Deleuze et Guattari⁷ à partir de l'œuvre de Kafka. Cette grille d'analyse permet d'appréhender les dynamiques d'inclusion, d'exclusion, ainsi que la structuration hiérarchique des systèmes de production, de légitimation et de diffusion des œuvres.

Cependant, la dichotomie centre-périphérie ne relève en rien d'une structure ontologique : elle résulte de constructions idéologiques et de rapports de pouvoir historiquement ancrés. C'est à partir de cette perspective que nous proposons d'examiner cette dynamique qui constitue un cadre d'analyse fécond pour penser les circulations littéraires, les hiérarchies culturelles et les tensions entre marginalité et légitimité. Dans ce contexte, cette analyse permet de mettre en

¹ Matías E. Margulis, *The Global Political Economy of Raúl Prebisch*, New York, Routledge, 2017.

² Immanuel Wallerstein, *Le Système du monde du XVI^e siècle à nos jours: L'économie-monde capitaliste*. Traduit par Alain Joxe, Paris, Flammarion, coll. « Champs », 2011. Publié à l'origine sous le titre *The Modern World-System*, en 1974.

³ Edward W. Said, *L'Orientalisme: L'Orient créé par l'Occident*. Traduit par Catherine Malamoud, Paris, Points, coll. « Points Essais », 2015.

⁴ Homi K. Bhabha, *Les lieux de la culture. Une théorie postcoloniale*, trad. Françoise Bouillot, Paris, Éditions Payot, 2007.

⁵ Pascale Casanova, *La République mondiale des lettres*, Paris, Seuil, 1999.

⁶ Franco Moretti, “Conjectures on World Literature”, London, *New Left Review*, no. 1, 2000, p. 54–68. À consulter en ligne sur <https://iedamagri.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/franco-moretti.pdf>

⁷ Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Pour une littérature mineure*, Paris, Minit, 1975.

lumière la manière dont certaines œuvres ou certains auteurs, situés à la marge des grands centres de production et de validation culturelle (Paris, New York, Londres, etc.), se voient inscrits dans une temporalité autre, souvent décalée, par rapport aux canons dominants. La périphérie n'est alors pas seulement un lieu géographique, mais un espace de différenciation symbolique, où le temps culturel et esthétique semble suivre un rythme distinct.

Le champ littéraire de l'Europe a longtemps été structuré autour d'un axe centre-périphérie. La France, foyer des Lumières, du rationalisme et d'une culture littéraire canonique à partir du XVIII^e siècle, a représenté ce centre. En dépit de l'attribut qui la définit, l'Europe « centrale », souvent morcelée politiquement et soumise à des dominations extérieures, a été perçue comme un espace périphérique, en décalage avec les tendances intellectuelles et esthétiques dominantes. Ce clivage n'est pas simplement géographique, il est aussi temporel. Le passé tragique de l'Est semble s'opposer à la modernité projective de l'Ouest, du moins à partir des Lumières. Dans le contexte de la Guerre froide, l'espace européen se reconfigure du point de vue de l'idéologie littéraire selon une logique binaire où s'affrontent deux centres hégémoniques que l'on peut éclairer à partir du modèle centre/périphérie développé par Immanuel Wallerstein dans sa théorie du système-monde⁸ — Moscou à l'Est, Paris (ou l'Europe occidentale) à l'Ouest — chacun prétendant représenter une forme de modernité universaliste qui ne sont d'ailleurs pas tellement différentes selon leurs revendications. En réalité, l'Est devient un espace de dérive totalitaire et de passé figé, l'Ouest celui du progrès libéral. Cette bipolarisation produit une cartographie symbolique fondée sur un axe centre/périphérie redoublé : l'Europe centrale s'y trouve reléguée au rang de périphérie, prise entre deux pouvoirs idéologiques opposés — l'un, du côté Est, se manifeste par la répression ; l'autre, du côté Ouest, opère à travers les rouages du marché capitaliste.

En mobilisant ce que Gramsci aurait appelé une hégémonie culturelle⁹ — soit la capacité d'un centre à imposer son récit comme normatif — l'Europe centrale est dépouillée de sa capacité à se représenter elle-même ses spécificités historiques et culturelles ; à l'Ouest, elle est perçue à travers le prisme réducteur du retard ou de l'exotisme douloureux — une posture que l'on peut rapprocher de l'orientalisme décrit par Edward Said¹⁰, où l'Autre

⁸ Immanuel Wallerstein, *op. cit.* (voir l'ensemble de l'ouvrage pour le développement de cette idée).

⁹ Antonio Gramsci, *Cahiers de prison*. Traduction de Jean-Yves Frégné et al., collection « Bibliothèque des idées », Paris, Folio, 2021.

¹⁰ Edward W. Said, *op. cit.* (voir l'ensemble de l'ouvrage pour le développement de cette idée).

est produit comme objet discursif plutôt que reconnu comme sujet. Ainsi, la périphérie n'est pas simplement dominée : elle est dépossédée de sa capacité à s'auto-désigner, prise dans un système de représentations qui la prive d'une centralité symbolique.

C'est dans cette perspective que se situe la présente étude, consacrée à la réception de l'œuvre romanesque de Milan Kundera, laquelle s'inscrit dans une dynamique d'échanges et de tensions entre l'Est et l'Ouest, révélant les potentialités critiques d'une littérature située dans un entre-deux géopolitique et esthétique.

Écrivain d'origine tchèque, exilé en France, Kundera occupe une position liminale au sein du champ littéraire européen. Sa trajectoire, marquée par une migration linguistique et un déplacement géopolitique, illustre ce que nous proposons d'appeler une *synchronisation différée* — un décalage entre les cadres d'intelligibilité auxquels il se rattache et les dynamiques de reconnaissance dans lesquelles il s'inscrit. Loin d'être un simple effet de retard ou d'exclusion, cette « temporalité autre » révèle des tensions profondes entre périphérie et centre, entre mémoire historique et inscription littéraire. Le « centre » s'arroge le monopole de la norme culturelle et de la maîtrise du temps historique — c'est-à-dire qu'il impose une vision linéaire et téléologique du progrès, souvent perçue comme universelle — tandis que la « périphérie » est assignée à un statut d'altérité, perçue comme retardataire, arriérée ou folklorisée. Cette hiérarchisation temporelle et culturelle, qui assigne aux sociétés non occidentales une position d'inachèvement ou de retard par rapport à une modernité présumée occidentale, constitue un ressort fondamental de la pensée coloniale. Johannes Fabian en a proposé une analyse critique dans *Le Temps et les Autres. Comment l'anthropologie construit son objet*¹¹ — en montrant comment le temps est mobilisé comme instrument de différenciation et de domination. Ce mécanisme repose sur ce que Dipesh Chakrabarty nomme l'« historicisme » colonial dans *Provincialiser l'Europe. La pensée postcoloniale et la différence historique*¹², c'est-à-dire une mise à distance épistémologique des sociétés colonisées, supposées inabouties et en attente d'une modernité définie selon des critères occidentaux. De manière complémentaire, Pascale Casanova dans *La République mondiale des lettres* (1999) montre comment, dans le champ littéraire, les périphéries sont

¹¹ Johannes Fabian, *Le Temps et les Autres. Comment l'anthropologie construit son objet*, trad. de l'anglais par E. Henry-Bossonney et B. Müller, avant-propos d'A. Bensa. Toulouse, éditions Anacharsis, coll. Griffes essais, 2^e édition.

¹² Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincialiser l'Europe. La pensée postcoloniale et la différence historique*, trad. par O. Ruchet et N. Vieillescazes, Paris, Éd. Amsterdam, [2000] 2009.

soumises à une forme d'exotisation ou de folklorisation, leur reconnaissance passant souvent par la conformité aux attentes esthétiques du centre. Enfin, Walter Mignolo et le courant de la décolonialité insistent sur la construction d'une « géopolitique du savoir »¹³ qui légitime cette inégalité dans l'accès à la parole et à la définition du temps historique.

La périphérie, loin d'être un espace de déficit culturel, peut être comprise — à rebours d'une vision téléologique de l'histoire littéraire — comme un laboratoire esthétique de formes alternatives. Dans ses essais, Kundera insiste sur le fait que le roman centre-européen n'est pas une imitation provinciale des modèles occidentaux, mais un espace où s'expérimentent des formes narratives spécifiques, nées de la fracture historique, du multilinguisme, de la fragilité identitaire et du destin tragique des petites nations. Cette idée rejoint ce que Homi K. Bhabha désigne comme *tiers-espace*¹⁴ — un espace culturel hybride, situé entre les centres de pouvoir, où émergent des formes inclassables. Dans cette perspective, la marginalité géographique ou politique devient le moteur d'une dynamique créative, et non un symptôme de retard.

De nombreux auteurs ont tenté de penser une forme de synchronisation esthétique et philosophique entre deux (semi-)mondes, sans effacer leurs différences constitutives. Milan Kundera, quant à lui, dénonce ce mécanisme dans son essai « Un Occident kidnappé ou la tragédie de l'Europe centrale »¹⁵ où il préfigure une critique plus large, reprise dans les études postcoloniales, mettant en lumière les mécanismes par lesquels les centres symboliques produisent les périphéries non seulement comme éloignement géographique, mais comme altérité discursive. Ce « kidnapping » idéologique transforme la périphérie en victime double : ignorée par l'Est soviétique qui s'en empare tout en niant ses traditions philosophiques et religieuses, et méprisée par l'Ouest qui ne la reconnaît qu'à travers ses drames. La tragédie que décrit Kundera n'est donc pas seulement géopolitique, mais épistémologique : elle interroge les conditions mêmes de visibilité, d'énonciation et de légitimité culturelle.

La réception de son œuvre en France a souvent été perçue comme un symbole de la reconnaissance d'un écrivain venu de la périphérie — la

¹³ Walter Mignolo, « Géopolitique de la connaissance, colonialité du pouvoir et différence coloniale », Paris, *Multitudes* 2001/3 (n° 6), p. 56–71, traduit par Jean Poitier, <https://shs.cairn.info/revue-multitudes-2001-3-page-56?lang=fr>

¹⁴ Homi K. Bhabha, *op. cit.* (voir l'ensemble de l'ouvrage pour le développement de cette idée).

¹⁵ Milan Kundera, « Un Occident kidnappé ou la tragédie de l'Europe centrale », *Le Débat*, 1983/5 (n° 27).

Tchécoslovaquie communiste — par le centre culturel qu'est la France. En effet, comme l'a montré Pascale Casanova dans sa théorie de la « littérature mondiale »¹⁶, la valeur symbolique d'un écrivain dépend de sa position dans le champ littéraire international : ainsi, un auteur français, issu d'un centre légitimé, est spontanément perçu comme plus universel — donc plus « européen » — qu'un écrivain originaire d'une périphérie littéraire comme la Tchécoslovaquie. Toutefois, réduire cette trajectoire à un simple transfert linéaire serait réductionniste. L'œuvre de Kundera engage un dialogue riche avec la littérature française, oscillant entre assimilation formelle et subversion idéologique. Nous nous attachons à démontrer que cette synchronisation n'est ni immédiate ni homogène : elle est différée, conflictuelle, marquée par la discontinuité historique (Guerre froide, exil, chute du communisme), mais aussi par un usage stratégique du décalage. Elle recèle ainsi une temporalité plurielle, inscrite dans un axe Est-Ouest qui, loin de s'uniformiser à l'époque du Rideau de fer, révèle des modèles esthétiques spécifiques, capables de réorienter la direction des flux culturels eux-mêmes. Ce processus se donne à lire aussi bien dans les formes littéraires qu'à travers les représentations fictionnelles du centre, de la périphérie, de l'Est et de l'Ouest.

Écrivain tchèque naturalisé français, Milan Kundera se situe à l'intersection de deux cultures, de deux traditions romanesques et de deux systèmes idéologico-politiques, entre la contrainte autoritaire du bloc soviétique et la liberté surveillée des démocraties de marché. Mais plus encore que son itinéraire biographique, c'est son œuvre — de *La plaisanterie* (1968) à *La fête de l'insignifiance* (2013), en passant par *ses essais* — qui met en scène une poétique de la désynchronisation. Dans ce qui suit, il s'agira d'examiner cette dynamique à la fois comme stratégie littéraire — formelle et philosophique — et comme réponse critique à la prétendue universalité du « centre » culturel français.

I. La synchronisation comme tension.

Centres périphériques et marges de l'entre-deux

Le passage de Kundera à la langue française enclenche sans doute son intégration au canon littéraire hexagonal. Pourtant, cette « francisation » n'a jamais été nette, dépourvue d'ambigüités. Depuis son installation en France,

¹⁶ Pascale Casanova, *op. cit.* (voir l'ensemble de l'ouvrage pour le développement de cette idée).

l'écriture de Kundera se resserre, gagnant en concision et en épure. Toutefois, cette évolution formelle ne s'accompagne pas d'une adhésion aux canons de la tradition romanesque française, qu'il s'agisse de l'univocalité narrative ou de la neutralité stylistique que Barthes désigne sous le nom d'« écriture blanche ».¹⁷ Cette tendance ne traduit pas un mimétisme, mais une volonté de s'affranchir des ornements inutiles pour faire place à l'essentiel — au roman comme instrument de pensée. Kundera oppose ainsi la tradition ironique et polyphonique du roman de l'Europe centrale (Kafka, Musil, Broch, Gombrowicz) à la tentation psychologique ou idéologique du roman français existentialiste (Sartre, Camus). Sa synchronisation avec la littérature française ne relève en rien d'une simple acculturation ou d'un alignement passif sur un canon occidental dominant. Si son exil en France à partir de 1975 marque effectivement une inflexion formelle dans son écriture — vers plus de concision, une composition plus maîtrisée, et une esthétique du fragment —, influencée par la tradition française du roman philosophique, cette transformation est moins le signe d'un abandon résigné, que celui d'une stratégie esthétique consciente, voire d'un déplacement tactique, car cette forme de dépouillement stylistique masque un déplacement du politique vers l'esthétique. Dans *L'Art du roman* (1986), Kundera revendique une filiation directe avec la tradition du roman d'idées français — de Diderot à Camus — tout en soulignant que cette tradition a été peu à peu réduite à une écriture transparente, centrée sur la psychologie ou sur un message politique univoque. Il déplore ainsi la lecture simplifiante qui domine en France, où le roman devient souvent un véhicule de communication, c'est-à-dire un texte immédiatement interprétable, assigné à une fonction sociale ou morale. Or, pour Kundera, cette lisibilité apparente constitue une autre forme de normalisation, plus subtile que la censure des régimes autoritaires, mais tout aussi appauvrissante — la réduction du roman à un message lisible, psychologique, idéologique ou engagé. Il affirme que « *l'esprit du roman est l'esprit de complexité* »¹⁸, et que la réduction du roman à une seule dimension — politique, psychologique ou idéologique — revient à trahir son essence. En cela, sa posture s'inscrit dans une critique de l'instrumentalisation fonctionnelle de la littérature dans les sociétés modernes, que l'on peut rapprocher de celle

¹⁷ Roland Barthes, *Le degré zéro de l'écriture*, Paris, Seuil, 2015.

¹⁸ Milan Kundera, *L'Art du roman* dans La Pléiade, tome II, Paris, Gallimard, 2016, p. 716 : « L'esprit du roman est l'esprit de complexité. Chaque roman dit au lecteur : les choses sont plus compliquées que tu ne le penses. »

d'Adorno dans *Théorie esthétique* (1989)¹⁹, ou encore de Mikhail Bakhtine²⁰, pour qui le roman est par définition un lieu de polyphonie, de coexistence de voix hétérogènes et inconciliables. En réponse à ce contexte français, Kundera valorise l'héritage du roman centre-européen non comme un conservatisme identitaire, mais comme un modèle esthétique alternatif. Il y puise une forme romanesque qui revendique l'ambiguïté morale, la discontinuité narrative et la distance ironique, en rupture avec les canons de la cohérence, de la linéarité formelle et de la clarté classique. Le dépouillement stylistique que l'on observe dans ses œuvres françaises (notamment *La Lenteur* (1995), *L'Identité* (1998), *L'Ignorance* (2003), *La Fête de l'insignifiance* (2014)) ne marque donc pas une mise en retrait, mais une reconfiguration: le politique n'est plus frontal, il ne l'a jamais été au fond, mais il n'est plus présent au centre de l'histoire ; il est déplacé dans les tensions formelles et les contradictions internes du récit. Ce que Kundera oppose à la lisibilité française, c'est une esthétique du doute, du jeu et de l'insaisissable, fidèle au roman comme espace de liberté critique. Or, cette capacité d'innovation formelle depuis la périphérie correspond à ce que Deleuze et Guattari²¹ appellent une littérature qui déterritorialise la langue majoritaire, qui invente de nouveaux usages politiques et esthétiques depuis une position de contrainte. Kafka, écrivant en allemand depuis Prague, en est l'archétype — et Kundera revendique cet héritage, en poursuivant cette poétique de la désorientation où le roman devient un lieu de résistance aux récits univoques, qu'ils soient politiques ou psychologiques. En ce sens, la « périphérie » chez Kundera n'est jamais synonyme de minoration culturelle. Elle est au contraire le site d'une réinvention du roman moderne, né de la confrontation entre cultures, langues et systèmes idéologiques. Elle permet d'échapper aux dogmatismes des centres — le réalisme socialiste à l'Est, le roman à thèse ou à message moral à l'Ouest — pour préserver ce que Kundera appelle « l'esprit du roman » : une esthétique de la complexité, du doute, de la pluralité des perspectives.

Dans son essai « Un Occident kidnappé: ou la tragédie de l'Europe centrale » (1984), Kundera écrit : « L'Europe centrale est cette partie de l'Europe située

¹⁹ Theodor W. Adorno, *Théorie esthétique*, édition originale *Ästhetische Theorie*, édité par Rolf Tiedemann, traduit de l'allemand par Marc Jimenez, Collection d'esthétique, Paris, Klincksieck, 2011.

²⁰ Mikhaïl Bakhtine, *Esthétique et théorie du roman*, trad. du russe par Daria Olivier, Collection Bibliothèque des Idées, Paris, Gallimard, 1987.

²¹ Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, *Kafka : pour une littérature mineure*, Collection « Critique », Paris, Les Editions de Minuit, 2013.

géographiquement au Centre, culturellement à l'Ouest, et politiquement à l'Est. »²² Il s'agit d'une zone marquée par le paradoxe et l'instabilité, et où le roman devient un lieu de résistance contre toute totalisation idéologique. À ses yeux, des auteurs comme Kafka, Musil, Broch ou Gombrowicz incarnent une sensibilité spécifiquement centre-européenne : une poétique de la dissonance, un refus du réalisme naïf, une obsession du destin individuel pris dans les rets de l'Histoire. Cette littérature périphérique, pour Kundera, n'est pas subalterne : elle est l'expression d'un esprit critique radical, qui frôle le nihilisme, sceptique, qui fait du roman le lieu d'un libertinage philosophique manifesté dans la coexistence de vérités multiples, irréconciliables. C'est ce que Deleuze et Guattari désignent comme une « littérature mineure »²³ — non pas une littérature de second rang, mais une littérature qui opère dans une langue majeure avec des effets de déterritorialisation, et qui politise à dessein la forme narrative elle-même. Ainsi, la périphérie centre-européenne, loin de simplement reproduire les codes du roman européen moderne (français, anglais ou russe) et d'être perçue comme un simple lieu dominé ou en retard par rapport aux centres culturels, devient un espace d'innovation formelle et propose des alternatives esthétiques et épistémiques : si fragmentation du moi et instabilité des voix narratives sont deux traits typiquement modernistes, l'ironie tragique et la tension entre cosmopolitisme et enracinement représentent le cachet de cet entre-deux. Transmuant l'instabilité politique et la fragilité identitaire de l'Europe centrale en matière esthétique, le roman s'impose comme un lieu de refondation continue. En ce sens, Kafka ou Kundera ne sont pas des auteurs « marginaux » mais des figures majeures d'une modernité littéraire construite depuis une marge définie comme « l'entre-deux ». Kundera, à la suite de Kafka, développe une esthétique de la dissonance et du jeu. Le roman devient un espace de conflit entre voix — entre discours dominants désobjectivisés (bureaucratiques, idéologiques, institutionnels) et subjectivités marginales — où la polyphonie prend une dimension politique en refusant l'unité narrative comme allégorie du pouvoir.

Le roman kundérien se présente alors comme une matrice spécifique, qui propose une lecture ironique de l'Histoire et de l'identité. Il revendique

²² Milan Kundera, « Un Occident kidnappé ou la tragédie de l'Europe centrale », *Le Débat*, novembre 1983/5 n° 27, p. 25, réimprimé à Paris, Gallimard, 2021 et disponible aussi sur <https://shs.cairn.info/revue-le-debat-1983-5-page-3?lang=fr&wt.src=pdf>

²³ Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, *op.cit.*, (voir l'ensemble de l'ouvrage pour le développement de cette idée).

une spécificité du roman centre-européen, conçu non comme un espace de témoignage, mais comme une forme de résistance intellectuelle. Ce type de roman naît d'une culture du soupçon qui préfère l'énigme au message univoque du roman engagé ou moralisateur, et qui se manifeste par une fragmentation narrative, une ironie constante, un brouillage des identités en phase avec la « crise de la conscience » moderne²⁴. Ce sont là des stratégies formelles liées à une condition historique : celle des écrivains qui ont subi l'expérience directe des régimes autoritaires ou post-totalitaires – au sein d'un espace politique instable, hétérogène de l'Empire –, où la langue elle-même devient un instrument de surveillance, de manipulation idéologique, voire de coercition symbolique.

Les romans tchèques de Kundera ne sont donc pas « en retard » sur le roman français, mais en porte-à-faux, porteur d'un contre-modèle narratif fondé sur la défiance et la dérision. Dans *Dicționarul romanului central-european din secolul XX* (2022), Adriana Babeți propose une lecture pénétrante et nuancée du roman d'Europe centrale du XX^e siècle, qu'elle érige en miroir des fractures identitaires, historiques et linguistiques propres à cette région aux frontières mouvantes. Selon elle, le roman centre-européen ne se définit pas tant par une appartenance géographique rigide (« pris comme dans un étau » entre l'Est et l'Ouest), que par une sensibilité partagée : une conscience aiguë de la complexité culturelle, de la mémoire collective traumatique et d'un perpétuel exil intérieur. Marqué par l'héritage des empires disparus, le totalitarisme du XX^e siècle et les tensions entre centre et périphérie, ce corpus littéraire se distingue par son ironie mélancolique, sa polyphonie narrative et son goût pour l'ambiguïté. Le roman centre-européen, tel qu'elle le conçoit, n'est pas un simple genre, mais un espace dialogique, un lieu de confrontation entre mémoire et oubli, entre fiction et Histoire²⁵.

Mais comment une écriture stylisée, complexe, parfois baroque, voire ludique chez Kundera peut-elle coexister avec la volonté de démonter les mécanismes d'un régime totalitaire, dont la gravité historique appelle généralement une forme de sobriété ou d'engagement explicite ? Autrement dit, si l'écriture de Kundera est dense, ironique, polyphonique, fragmentée, etc., comment n'échoue-t-elle pas dans l'esthétisation du politique ? Dans ses premiers romans écrits en tchèque, tels que *La Plaisanterie* (1968) ou *La Vie est ailleurs* (1973), Kundera développe une écriture dense, baroque, polyphonique, où s'entrelacent

²⁴ Paul Hazard, *La crise de la conscience européenne, 1680–1715*, Paris, Le Livre de Poche, 1994.

²⁵ Adriana Babeți (coord.), *Dicționarul romanului central-european din secolul XX*, Iași, Polirom, 2022, p. 17–18.

récits fragmentés, digressions historiques, méditations philosophiques et satire politique. Cette forme éclatée n'est pas un jeu gratuit, ni une fuite face à la réalité du pouvoir : elle constitue, au contraire, une contre-forme (dans la structure) et un contre-récit (dans le contenu), c'est-à-dire une forme de résistance qui s'oppose aux discours dominants ou hégémoniques et qui remet en question les versions « officielles » de l'histoire, de l'identité, ou de la vérité, souvent imposées par un pouvoir politique, idéologique ou culturel. L'écriture dense, baroque, polyphonique et fragmentée — mêlant fiction, digression historique, méditation philosophique et satire politique — correspond très bien à une stratégie de subversion du récit totalisant. En ce sens, la fragmentation narrative rompt avec la linéarité du récit classique, souvent associée à une vision téléologique de l'Histoire, telle que la promeuvent les régimes totalitaires. Les méditations philosophiques introduisent de la complexité, du doute, de la pluralité — autant d'éléments que le totalitarisme cherche à éliminer. La satire politique attaque directement les récits officiels imposés par le pouvoir. Enfin, la polyphonie, par ses points de vue divergents, empêche toute vision unifiée ou dogmatique du monde, là où le pouvoir recherche l'unanimité.

Cette poétique de la discontinuité et de la pluralité trouve un écho chez Milan Kundera, pour qui le roman constitue avant tout un espace de résistance à l'idéologie et une exploration profonde de la complexité humaine.

Le roman n'examine pas la réalité mais l'existence. Et l'existence n'est pas ce qui s'est passé, l'existence est le champ des possibilités humaines, tout ce que l'homme peut devenir, tout ce dont il est capable. Les romanciers dessinent la carte de l'existence en découvrant telle ou telle possibilité humaine. Mais encore une fois : exister, cela veut dire : « être-dans-le-monde ». Il faut donc comprendre et le personnage et son monde comme possibilités.²⁶

Et cette existence, dans son ambiguïté, ses contradictions, est irréductible à tout récit unique — que ce soit celui de l'État, de l'Histoire ou de l'idéologie. On peut parler de contre-récit, dans la mesure où la forme et le contenu des premiers romans de Kundera s'opposent à la logique totalitaire en refusant toute forme de récit univoque, simplificateur ou dogmatique. Là où le totalitarisme cherche l'unité, la clarté, l'orthodoxie idéologique et l'abolition de l'ambiguïté, Kundera répond par la complexité formelle, l'ironie et la multiplicité des

²⁶ Milan Kundera, *La Pléiade*, tome II, *L'Art du roman*, Paris, Gallimard, 2011, 2016, p. 732.

perspectives. Ce n'est pas en dépit de cette esthétique du détour, mais bien à travers elle que s'effectue une mise en question du régime par une poétique de la dissonance, qui met en question les mécanismes de la langue officielle, de la mémoire falsifiée et du mensonge institutionnalisé. Loin d'esthétiser la violence politique, l'écriture baroque de Kundera en dévoile les impasses par l'ironie, le retournement et le refus du manichéisme. Le roman kundérien n'est pas un roman qui dénonce en bloc, mais qui déstabilise les certitudes du lecteur. Cette écriture rejoint des analyses faites par Kundera lui-même, notamment dans *L'Art du roman* (1986) ou *Les Testaments trahis* (1993), où il défend un roman non idéologique, critique, pluriel, qui échappe à l'instrumentalisation.

Néanmoins, après son installation en France et surtout à partir du *Livre du rire et de l'oubli* (1979), écrit en tchèque mais publié directement en traduction française, on peut remarquer un changement progressif dans son style. Cet élément nous invite à reconsidérer la répartition de son œuvre romanesque en deux cycles — tchèque et français —, répartition traditionnellement fondée sur le critère linguistique, à savoir la langue d'écriture. Ce roman marque une étape de transition : bien que l'intrigue reste ancrée dans le contexte pragois et que les thèmes politiques subsistent, l'écriture devient plus limpide, mieux structurée, avec un net souci de clarification conceptuelle. Cet assagissement stylistique atteint son apogée dans les romans écrits directement en français, comme *La Lenteur* (1995), *L'Identité* (1997), *L'Ignorance* (2003) et surtout dans *La Fête de l'insignifiance* (2014) où l'épuration devient si radicale qu'elle frôle l'effacement du romanesque lui-même. Dans ces romans, Kundera abandonne les fresques historiques — en tant que formes narratives étendues et complexes et non simplement comme trame ou bruit de fond (présence d'un contexte historique) — et les intrigues foisonnantes pour des récits plus courts, plus sobres, au ton elliptique et mélancolique, souvent centrés sur l'intime, l'identité, la mémoire personnelle — autant de thèmes prisés par le roman français contemporain à la manière de Modiano, quoique dans un registre stylistique et philosophique sensiblement distinct. Cette dépuración de l'écriture coïncide avec une certaine perte des strates historiques complexes qui nourrissaient ses romans tchèques. L'histoire collective cède le pas à une méditation existentielle plus universelle, mais aussi plus déterritorialisée. Parallèlement, ce glissement traduit une dialectique entre assimilation et résistance : l'auteur périphérique souhaite s'adresser au centre, adopter ses formes, parler sa langue, mais sans renier son altérité. Kundera ne cesse de revendiquer une identité d'« écrivain européen », et non exclusivement française ou tchèque — mais cette revendication se heurte

à une tension fondamentale dès lors qu'elle est pensée à travers le prisme du rapport centre/périphérie. Comme le remarque Jean-Paul Enthoven dans le film documentaire intitulé *Milan Kundera : From the Joke to Insignificance* (2021)²⁷, la réception de Kundera en France a été marquée par une attente implicite : celle de le voir incarner le rôle du dissident exemplaire, résistant éclairé face au totalitarisme communiste, un écrivain venu de l'Est pour confirmer les récits que l'Occident se raconte sur lui-même. La critique française, pourtant initialement séduite, aurait été prête à l'ériger en figure tutélaire, à condition qu'il se conforme à cette image projetée. Mais Kundera a refusé d'endosser ce rôle. Il n'a pas voulu devenir l'écrivain d'Europe centrale que Paris attendait — ni un moraliste à la Diderot, ni un romancier du moi à la Stendhal, ni un styliste à la Flaubert. En s'écartant de ce modèle esthétique et intellectuel imposé par le centre, il s'est exposé à une forme de désaffection critique, comme s'il avait trahi une attente tacite. C'est précisément ce refus d'être assigné à une posture qui rend son œuvre difficilement récupérable dans les cadres canoniques dominants. Cette dynamique est visible dans sa trajectoire qui manifeste cette tension entre enracinement périphérique et désir de reconnaissance au sein du canon littéraire occidental.

Inscrite dans une poétique de la frontière, son écriture devient un lieu de dialogue et de négociation entre deux cultures. Si les strates historiques et la complexité formelle propres à ses romans tchèques tendent à s'effacer, la mémoire de l'exil, elle, toujours présente en creux, se reformule dans un resserrement stylistique et une langue plus épurée, davantage soucieuse de lisibilité, comme stratégie d'adaptation à un nouveau contexte culturel et littéraire. Cette épuration s'explique également par la conscience aiguë, chez Kundera, de la nécessité d'un langage simple et précis, indispensable pour une traduction fidèle et sans équivoque. Toutefois, si l'on observe une tendance à l'épuration stylistique dans les romans français tardifs de Kundera, celle-ci ne relève pas pour autant de l'« écriture blanche » au sens camusien. Là où Camus cherche une neutralité émotionnelle et une objectivité stylistique, Kundera maintient une narration réflexive, ironique et profondément subjective, qui fait de la pensée une composante indissociable du romanesque. Chez Kundera, l'écriture romanesque est tout sauf neutre : elle est littéraire, consciente d'elle-même, construite comme une sonde existentielle.

²⁷ *Milan Kundera: From the Joke to Insignificance*, film documentaire réalisé par Miloslav Šmídmajer, Télévision tchèque/Bio Illusion, 2021.

Au-delà des décalages apparents entre les deux cultures — tchèque et française — qui structurent la réception de l'œuvre de Milan Kundera, c'est un projet esthétique profondément cohérent qui traverse l'ensemble de sa trajectoire romanesque. Si l'on peut identifier des transformations formelles ou contextuelles entre ce que l'on a coutume d'appeler le « cycle tchèque » et le « cycle français », ces changements ne sauraient être compris comme des ruptures fondamentales. Car il y a une unité et une cohérence assurées par une constellation thématique récurrente (la mémoire, l'oubli, l'exil, l'ironie, le kitsch, l'identité, l'histoire...), sous-jacente de l'œuvre. L'unité ne procède pas d'un récit linéaire ou d'un style homogène, mais d'un ensemble de motifs philosophiques et existentiels qui traversent l'ensemble de son œuvre. En revanche, les ruptures, la discontinuité et la fragmentation appartiennent à la structure narrative, mais aussi à une esthétique du roman qui revendique la complexité, le jeu des perspectives, et le refus des formes closes ou dogmatiques. Ce que souligne Květoslav Chvatík est que ce qui se joue dans cette évolution n'est pas tant une discontinuité qu'une transposition, une manière pour Kundera d'adapter son esthétique à un nouvel environnement tout en restant fidèle à ses interrogations fondatrices.

« La cohérence architectonique, la construction solide, l'imbrication sans faille des différents éléments » – la définition que donne Llosa du roman serait une bonne définition des romans de Kundera. De même que, dans les opéras de Wagner, les différents instruments reprennent le « leitmotive » central de la composition, les « leitmotive » des romans de Kundera sont repris par les différents personnages. Les motifs se retrouvent de livre en livre, et le petit motif secondaire d'un roman devient un motif principal du suivant. Ainsi le motif de la « plaisanterie », motif central du premier roman de Kundera auquel il donne son titre, est présent déjà dans « Personne ne va rire », première nouvelle de *Risibles amours*. Le motif de *l'âge lyrique* suggéré dans *La Plaisanterie* devient le thème central du roman *La vie est ailleurs*. Le motif de « l'insoutenable légèreté de l'être » qui a donné son titre au roman de Kundera qui a connu jusqu'à ce jour le plus grand succès, est développé encore dans *L'Immortalité* – le narrateur regrette même d'avoir déjà utilisé ce titre et de ne plus pouvoir le donner à son nouveau roman. Nous pourrions continuer ainsi en montrant que presque tous les motifs de Kundera se retrouvent de livre en livre, se changent de thèmes secondaires en thèmes principaux, s'enrichissent de nouvelles variations et apparaissent dans d'autres contextes thématiques et sémantiques. — L'œuvre romanesque de Kundera forme un *tout cohérent*, un *univers imaginaire* autonome ; il est construit sur la base d'un cercle de motifs et de thèmes

précisément tracé avec leurs variations et leurs combinaisons instrumentalisées à travers différentes stratégies narratives.²⁸

Kundera lui-même souligne cette cohérence, cette unité intrinsèque de son œuvre. À ce titre, un article intitulé « Diabolum », rédigé par Milan Kundera en 1993 et repris dans *Le monde romanesque de Milan Kundera* (1995), atteste la validité des arguments exposés précédemment :

Il n'y a, dans mon évolution romanesque, aucune rupture entre ce que j'ai écrit en Bohême et ce que j'ai écrit en France. Ni entre les romans situés en Bohême communiste et *L'Immortalité*, dont l'action se passe ici. Présupposer une telle rupture, et surtout la considérer comme inévitable, c'est être victime de deux préjugés.²⁹

Kundera considère que le premier des deux préjugés qui faussent la lecture de son œuvre est d'ordre esthétique : on attend souvent du roman qu'il fournisse un témoignage sur un pays ou un contexte historique. Or, selon lui, ce n'est pas là la vocation du roman. *La Vie est ailleurs* (1973), bien qu'ancrée dans l'époque du stalinisme, ne vise pas à dénoncer le régime communiste, mais à explorer un thème existentiel — celui du lyrisme, dont il montre comment il peut se métamorphoser en violence idéologique. De même, *L'Immortalité* (1990) ne traite pas principalement de la société du spectacle contemporaine, mais d'une question plus profonde et intemporelle : le regard que l'homme porte sur lui-même à travers celui des autres, obsession présente dès ses premiers écrits.

Le second préjugé est politique : il consiste à opposer de manière trop radicale les mondes communiste et démocratique. Kundera admet qu'ils diffèrent sur le plan institutionnel, mais rappelle que, pour un romancier, le point de départ est toujours la vie concrète des individus. Or, à ce niveau, il observe de profondes similitudes entre ces deux régimes. Ce qu'il percevait autrefois comme les signes particuliers du totalitarisme — la standardisation des modes de vie, la vulgarité médiatique, la bureaucratie tentaculaire, la négation de la vie privée — s'est révélé être, avec le temps, l'expression plus générale de traits caractéristiques du monde moderne. L'expérience du communisme lui a ainsi permis de percevoir, avec une acuité particulière, des tendances globales que l'Occident accepte trop souvent comme allant de soi.

²⁸ *Kvĕtoslav Chvatík, Le monde romanesque de Milan Kundera*, Collection Arcades, Paris, Gallimard, 1995, p.215–216.

²⁹ *Idem*, p. 244.

Cela invite à reconsidérer l'idée souvent avancée d'une rupture franche entre ses romans tchèques et ses romans français, ainsi que l'association systématique de son écriture à un contre-récit politique. Kundera y affirme explicitement qu'aucune discontinuité profonde ne marque son évolution romanesque, centrée sur des questions existentielles universelles, et non sur une simple chronique historique ou politique. Cette position remet en cause une lecture traditionnelle selon laquelle Kundera aurait opéré un saut radical, passant d'une écriture engagée, militante contre le totalitarisme communiste, à une écriture déterritorialisée, plus épurée et désincarnée dans ses romans français. Au contraire, Kundera considère ses œuvres comme deux « versants » d'un même ensemble cohérent, fondé sur une même réflexion sur l'homme, la mémoire et l'identité.

D'autre part, il nuance l'opposition manichéenne entre le communisme et la démocratie libérale, en montrant que les mécanismes d'aliénation, de bureaucratie et de dépossession de l'individu traversent ces deux mondes, ce qui relativise l'idée d'un changement radical de regard entre les deux contextes. Ainsi, l'expérience du communisme, loin de n'être qu'un simple cadre politique, constitue une sorte d'introduction aiguë à une modernité universelle marquée par des phénomènes absurdes que Kundera retrouve aussi dans les démocraties occidentales.

Cette réflexion implique que l'écriture de Kundera n'est pas d'abord un contre-récit visant à opposer un discours dissident à une vérité officielle, mais plutôt une méditation philosophique sur les conditions humaines fondamentales. La « résistance » à laquelle il s'adonne est donc plus subtile, plus intérieure et universelle que la simple dénonciation politique.

En somme, la prétendue rupture entre Kundera tchèque et Kundera français est une illusion issue de préjugés esthétiques et politiques. L'Œuvre, dans son ensemble, forme une unité thématique et philosophique, qui transcende les contextes géopolitiques et linguistiques pour interroger les constants de la condition humaine.

Si le changement de langue d'écriture, de forme narrative et d'espace géopolitique marque les deux périodes, Ricard³⁰ insiste néanmoins sur la continuité esthétique et morale qui les relie. Des passerelles multiples — qu'il s'agisse de types de personnages récurrents, de motifs obsédants ou encore d'une vision du monde caractérisée par une certaine ironie mélancolique — traversent les deux versants de ce massif romanesque. Des leitmotifs tels que l'exil, l'identité, la mémoire ou la dérision opèrent comme des fils rouges, assurant à l'œuvre

³⁰ François Ricard, *Le dernier après-midi d'Agnès*, Collection Arcades, Paris, Gallimard, 2003.

une cohérence souterraine. Leur récurrence, loin de figer le sens, contribue à structurer un univers romanesque traversé par des tensions constantes entre légèreté et gravité, oubli et mémoire, enracinement et aliénation. Ce ne sont pas de simples thématiques récurrentes, mais les vecteurs d'une vision du monde, d'une poétique propre, nourrie par une ironique mélancolie face à la condition humaine. Ils traversent *La Vie est ailleurs* (1973), *La Valse aux adieux* (1976), *Le Livre du rire et de l'oubli* (1979), ou encore *L'Insoutenable légèreté de l'être* (1984) et ressurgissent avec une intensité nouvelle dans *L'Ignorance* (2003), où l'exil se fait métaphore existentielle.

Loin de constituer une rupture, le passage d'une langue et d'un pays à un autre s'accompagne ainsi d'une fidélité aux grandes questions qui traversent toute l'œuvre de Kundera : qu'est-ce que l'appartenance ? Que signifie se souvenir ? Et comment penser la légèreté dans un monde lesté de gravité historique ? L'évolution de Kundera illustre parfaitement les tensions esthétiques et identitaires qui traversent le parcours d'un écrivain exilé : l'intégration dans le champ littéraire dominant implique une conversion formelle, mais cette conversion n'est jamais totale — elle porte en elle la trace d'une différence irréductible, qui nourrit la singularité de son œuvre. En ce sens, le passage d'une langue à une autre ne correspond pas à une conversion radicale, mais à une modulation du même projet esthétique. Si la forme narrative évolue — vers la condensation, voire le dépouillement —, ce n'est pas en vertu d'un reniement, mais d'une volonté de concentration autour d'un noyau dur d'interrogations existentielles dotées d'une portée universalisante. C'est en ce sens que Kundera lui-même qualifie ses romans de « massif », un terme géologique qui suggère une unité interne faite de strates hétérogènes mais solidement articulées, renvoyant à la conception d'une œuvre unifiée — celle consacrée sous le titre singulier d'*Œuvre* dans l'édition de la Pléiade.

Un parallèle peut être établi entre Mircea Cărtărescu et Milan Kundera : dans les deux cas, l'évolution de l'écriture ne marque pas une rupture radicale, mais plutôt une reconfiguration du même projet littéraire au sein d'un nouveau cadre symbolique. Dans *Solenoid*, Andrei Terian³¹ identifie un « hypercycle narratif », par lequel Cărtărescu intègre, recompose et intensifie des thèmes déjà présents dans ses œuvres antérieures — notamment l'autobiographie, la marginalité géoculturelle et la quête existentielle — pour leur donner une portée élargie

³¹ TERIAN, Andrei, „The Poetics of the Hypercycle in Mircea Cărtărescu's *Solenoid*”, *Life Writing*, 19(3), 323–340, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14484528.2020.1747351>

et une cohérence cyclique. Comme chez Kundera, il s'agit d'une concentration autour d'un noyau thématique stable, dont la complexité ne fait que s'accroître avec le temps. La narration devient plus dense, réflexive, et assume pleinement une dimension métapoétique. Si Kundera parle d'un « massif » pour désigner la cohérence stratifiée de son œuvre, Cărtărescu construit, selon Terian, une architecture en spirale, à la fois rétrospective et prospective, où chaque livre éclaire et restructure l'ensemble.

Dans cette perspective, le clivage entre les deux périodes de l'écriture romanesque kundérienne (tchèque et française) — souvent surévalué dans la critique — perd de sa pertinence au profit d'une lecture qui met en avant la cohérence d'une esthétique du déplacement, de l'entre-deux, où la fidélité à certaines formes d'ambiguïté, de fragmentation et d'ironie constitue une véritable signature d'auteur. Au-delà des décalages entre les deux cultures, il y a un projet esthétique auquel les deux âges de son œuvre sont subsumés, car il y a une unité esthétique au-delà des ruptures, une poétique de la fidélité. Le parcours de Kundera illustre donc une tension féconde entre transformation et continuité ; l'intégration dans un nouveau champ culturel implique des ajustements formels, mais ces derniers sont toujours traversés par une différence irréductible — non comme une marque d'altérité subie, mais comme la condition même d'une œuvre singulière, inclassable, résolument transnationale. Kundera déplace les frontières du genre et invite à concevoir le roman comme un espace de réflexion, de pluralité formelle et de confrontation intellectuelle.

Ainsi, derrière l'évolution stylistique de Milan Kundera — du baroque polyphonique de ses romans tchèques à l'épuration maîtrisée de ses romans français —, se dessine une continuité esthétique et intellectuelle plus profonde qu'il n'y paraît. Loin d'un simple effet d'acculturation ou de compromis avec les attentes du canon littéraire français, ce glissement formel relève d'une stratégie narrative complexe, visant à préserver, sous d'autres formes, l'esprit du roman comme espace de liberté, de polyphonie et de résistance à toute forme d'orthodoxie. En s'inscrivant dans une filiation à la fois centre-européenne et française, Kundera invente une posture singulière : celle d'un écrivain en exil qui refuse de choisir entre les centres, et qui fait de la marge le lieu d'une expérimentation formelle radicale. Le roman devient alors, non plus un miroir transparent du réel, ni un vecteur d'idéologie, mais un laboratoire de formes, une machine à penser l'ambiguïté du monde. Ce refus des dichotomies simplificatrices — Est/Ouest, engagement/détachement, politique/esthétique — témoigne d'un projet romanesque profondément moderne, où l'exil devient non seulement une

condition biographique, mais une position épistémique féconde. À l'image de Kafka, de Broch ou de Gombrowicz, Kundera s'inscrit dans une tradition périphérique qui, en se tenant à distance des centres, parvient à renouveler en profondeur les formes du roman européen.

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LATIN AMERICAN LITERATURE AS WORLD LITERATURE: CULTURAL AND POLITICAL GAMES BETWEEN PERIPHERIES AFTER THE SECOND WORLD WAR. THE ROMANIAN CASE

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Abstract: The globalization of Latin American literature after World War II is often associated with the emergence of a multitude of influential and successful fiction writers on the world cultural scene, collectively known as the *Boom*. This article aims to qualify this perception by emphasizing the importance of an earlier phase of globalization that occurred mainly in European socialist countries in the early 1950s under the auspices of the World Peace Congress. This phase had an important influence on the subsequent penetration of these countries by authors associated with the *Boom*. Focusing on Romanian culture, we demonstrate how it aligns with the successive phases of globalization of Latin American literature. We also highlight that the cultural connection between these regions is based on a dynamic of inter-peripheral relations that largely bypasses cultural consecration granted by traditional “centers” of legitimacy – whether Moscow or Paris.

Keywords: *Boom, politics, synchronization, translation, world literature.*

1. Latin American Literature in Light of World Literature Theory

The beginning of the twenty-first century has been significantly characterized in a substantial zone of literary studies by the reformulation of the comparative literature field as World Literature. The editions of Pascale Casanova’s *The World Republic of Letters* (1999, 2004), as well as works such

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as David Damrosch's *What is World Literature?* (2003) and the revolutionary proposals put forth by Franco Moretti in texts like *Modern Epic: From Goethe to García Márquez* (1996) and *Graphs, Maps, and Trees: Abstract Models for Literary History* (2005), have necessitated a fundamental rethinking of pair-concepts such as "center/ periphery", "original work/ translation" and "author/ gatekeeper", among others. The Latin American *Boom* of the 1960s – 1980s, a phenomenon of global recognition for authors considered quintessential to Latin American literature, represented for the initiators of this type of literary criticism a privileged case for reflection on the seemingly sudden and certainly spectacular globalization of a literature that had previously been considered peripheral. Conversely, from the perspective of specialists in Latin American literature, the reading offered by the proponents of the World Literature theory regarding this case of globalization warrants several amendments. In a work published in 2006, Ignacio M. Sánchez Prado convenes a series of leading researchers in Latin American studies to demonstrate "the consistent inability of European (and, possibly, North American) criticism to account for the role of Latin American literature in transnational literary systems"¹.

Almost all the authors cited by Prado express their reservations regarding Moretti's working method, "distant reading". However, what raises even further doubts in the specific domain of Latin American literature is the limitation to the realm of the novel. Although most of the writers of the *Boom* are indeed novelists, the core of the Latin American literary canon is Borges, an author of short stories, essays, and poems; this leads Moretti to omit Borges from his study. Furthermore, Borges did not receive the Nobel Prize, thus occupying a marginal role in Casanova's work². On the other hand, as Efraín Kristal points out, the exclusion of poetry from reflections on the globalization of Latin American literature results in a complete distortion of its specificity, given that in this case "poetry was the dominant genre until the 1960s"³. Kristal aims

¹ "la consistente incapacidad de la crítica europea (y, eventualmente, norteamericana) de dar cuenta del rol de la literatura latinoamericana en sistemas literarios transnacionales". Ignacio M. Sánchez Prado, "*Hijos de Metapa: un recorrido conceptual de la literatura mundial (a manera de introducción)*", in Ignacio M. Sánchez Prado (ed.), *América Latina en la "literatura mundial"*, Pittsburgh, Pittsburg University/Biblioteca de América, Instituto Internacional de literatura Iberoamericana, 2006, p. 8.

² Graciela Montaldo, "La expulsión de la república, la deserción del mundo", in Ignacio M. Sánchez Prado (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 263.

³ "la poesía fue el género dominante hasta los años sesenta". Efraín Kristal, "*Considerando en frío...*". *Una respuesta a Franco Moretti*, in Ignacio M. Sánchez Prado (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 103.

to demonstrate that literary relationships do not necessarily radiate from the center to the periphery, but can have the most diverse orientations: as a proof, he provides the almost literal citation in a monologue from Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (thus from a play at the center of the Western canon post-World War II) of the poem *Considerando en frío* by the "peripheral" Peruvian poet César Vallejo, whom the Irish writer encountered while working as a translator for UNESCO in Paris⁴. Kristal's corollary is: "Moretti's model is designed to show how the periphery adapts the forms of the center, but it falls short on the other side of the equation"⁵.

The majority of authors reunited in the volume edited by Prado find even more troubling Moretti's reliance in his studies solely on Latin Americanist critics from the United States, such as Doris Sommer and Jean Franco, to the detriment of fundamental Latin American critics, such as Ángel Rama. They criticize Moretti's method of reading as one that "rests upon the prevailing geopolitics of knowledge in the center"⁶ and also detect colonialist reflexes and "centralized provincialism" when Casanova renders value judgments and canonical hierarchies from the position of the "center" based on an "aesthetic modernity"⁷ that has already become outdated. Likewise, Jean Franco reprove the critical delay of these critics, who seem to "discover the inequality of the world republic as if it were a novelty, ignoring that since the colonial period, Latin Americans have been fully aware of it"⁸, and she enumerates some tactics adopted in order to resist the hegemonic power: heterogeneity, transculturation, hybridization, "anthropophagy", which were deeply analysed by Latin-American scholars such as Antonio Cornejo Polar, Ángel Rama, Néstor García Canclini, and Oswaldo de Andrade.

One could argue that the dissatisfaction with the proposals of the two pioneering theorists in World Literature studies, as expressed in the essays compiled by Ignacio M. Sánchez Prado in the 2006 collective volume, stems from the fact that, when viewed from a broader perspective, regional literary

⁴ *Idem*, p. 110.

⁵ *Idem*, p. 112: "El modelo de Moretti está diseñado para mostrar cómo la periferia adapta las formas del centro, pero queda corto en el otro lado de la ecuación".

⁶ Graciela Montaldo, *op. cit.*, p. 263.

⁷ Hugo Achugar, "Apuntes sobre la « literatura mundial », o acerca de la imposible universalidad de la « literatura universal »", in Ignacio M. Sánchez Prado (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 204.

⁸ Jean Franco, "Nunca son pesadas/las cosas que por agua están pasadas", in Ignacio M. Sánchez Prado (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 187: "descubre[n] la desigualdad de la republica mundial como si fuera una novedad, ignorando que desde la colonia, los latinoamericanos tenían plena conciencia de ella".

history, on the one hand, and the literary canon, on the other hand, display configurations that differ markedly from those familiar to local scholars. This phenomenon of distortion is in fact inevitable when a work, a movement, or a local theory are projected onto the global circuit, as David Damrosch previously argued⁹. Even so, certain distortions remain unacceptable to scholars who see their national or regional literatures being interpreted through the lens of a globalization theory that they regard as insufficiently robust on a theoretical level. Among the critiques raised, Kristal's observation regarding the partiality of a theory that fails to account for the predominance of poetry in Latin America up to the 1960s stands out. Similarly, Jean Franco's reservations about the superficial manner in which Pascale Casanova addresses the role of international politics in globalization processes are justified.

This article aims to substantiate the legitimacy of the reservations expressed by Kristal and Jean Franco regarding the foundational theories of World Literature, by drawing on arguments arising from the case of the reception of Latin American literature in Romania – particularly the Latin American *Boom*. More specifically, in response to the invitation for collective reflection posed by this *Synthesis* issue, we seek to illustrate the “synchronization” of Romanian culture through the translation of the Latin American *Boom* – a literary phenomenon that captivated countries on both sides of the Iron Curtain, albeit under significantly different conditions. At the same time, we argue that the globalization of Latin American literature is not just the result of its recognition in Western centers of consecration; rather, (semi) peripheral cultures in the Eastern Bloc have also played a significant role in this process.

The most salient feature of this cultural connection is its foundation in a dynamic of inter-peripheral relations that largely bypasses the cultural consecration granted by traditional “centers” of legitimacy – whether Moscow or Paris. Despite occasional influences from these centers, the cultural importation in question is ultimately shaped by local traditions, cultural needs, and sociopolitical pressures. In fact, much like the Latin American scholars mentioned earlier, Alex Goldiș has demonstrated that the reception of the

⁹ “As it moves into the sphere of world literature, far from inevitably suffering a loss of authenticity or essence, a work can gain in many ways. [...] To understand the workings of world literature, we need more a phenomenology than an ontology of the work of art: a literary work manifests differently abroad than it does at home”, David Damrosch, *What is World Literature?*, Princeton and Oxford, Princeton UP, 2003, p. 6.

Latin American novel associated with the *Boom* in the Eastern Bloc countries challenges the models of literary circulation established in World Literature studies by Franco Moretti and Pascale Casanova. These models are clearly “West-centric” and rely on a rigid distinction between major and minor cultures, or between source and target cultures. In contrast, Goldiș argues:

Perhaps the consecration of the Latin American novel as a world genre is indebted to these offshore literary economies that nevertheless add value to its formula. The so-called minor literatures are not excluded from the international mechanism of establishing cultural values but are integral parts of it. [...] The adoption of American Latin novel in Eastern European contexts during the liberalization is the outcome of the relations not only between Eastern European and the temporary sub-center of Latin American literatures, but also between each one of them and the hegemonic “capitals” establishing the cultural legitimacy: the Soviet Union and Western Europe.¹⁰

2. Beyond the Boom's Auto-Mythification: The First Phase of Latin American Literature's Globalization in the Socialist Bloc

Goldiș's conclusions are undoubtedly valid, but his focus exclusively on the novel and on the impact of *Boom* authors in Romania reflects the persistent impression that Latin American literature was suddenly “discovered” in the 1960s through the sheer magic of a set of captivating narratives and the exceptional talent of a few authors who succeeded in shifting their continent's literature from a peripheral position to the very center of the “World Republic of Letters”.

This understanding is not surprising, given that it aligns with the standard reading of Latin American literary history in Western literary scholarship. Nonetheless, it is important to emphasize that the thesis of Latin American literature's globalization via the *Boom* is a highly debatable one: it should be approached with caution because it has been promoted by the very figures who were both agents and beneficiaries of this literary globalization via the *Boom* – namely Carlos Fuentes in *La nueva novela hispanoamericana*, (1969), Mario Vargas Llosa, in the essay *Novela primitiva y novela de creación en América*

¹⁰ Alex Goldiș, “The Import of the Latin American Novel in Romania: « Meaningful Voids » and Selection Principles of a (Semi)peripheral National Market”, *Transylvanian Review*, supl. no. 1, 2022, p. 108–109.

Latina (1969), and José Donoso in *Historia personal del ,boom'* (1972). In his 1969 article, the author of *La ciudad y los perros* describes this phenomenon as “a climactic moment in Latin American narrative”, which he contrasts with what he perceives as the exhaustion of Western literature – once held as the unattainable pinnacle of literary quality:

In these times, when the European and North American novel is agonizing between hermetic formalist acrobatics and a monotonous conformity with tradition, we should rejoice. Not so much for Latin America, since the vitality of a narrative often signals a profound crisis in the reality that inspires it, but rather for the life of the novel itself.¹¹

What these three essays suggest is that the globalization of Latin American literature – its penetration into the world’s critical consciousness – is the result of overcoming a narrow provincialism, a realist tellurism lacking universal projection; in other words, it stems from a perceived “backwardness” in relation to other, “central” literary traditions. Beyond the skepticism that any unconditionally subjective account may provoke – especially when it bears self-indulgent overtones – and beyond critiques of its “metropolitan” subtext (where only what is “approved” by the metropolis is considered valuable), it must be noted that this heroic narrative presents problems even from the perspective of the global centers of cultural promotion. Indeed, long before 1961 – when Borges received the International Prize for Literature alongside Samuel Beckett – or 1962, when Seix Barral awarded the Biblioteca Breve Prize to Vargas Llosa’s *La ciudad y los perros*, which would be published the following year – Latin American literature was already widely translated and published in the USSR and other socialist countries. In the early 1950s we can speak about a “communist” globalization, in Jorge J. Locane’s terms – whose center of consecration was Moscow, not Paris, and whose protagonists were primarily poets (most notably Pablo Neruda, followed by Nicolás Guillén and Raúl González Tuñón).

¹¹ “En estos tiempos en que la novela europea y norteamericana agoniza entre herméticas acrobacias formalistas y una monótona conformidad con la tradición, conviene alegrarse. No tanto por América Latina, pues la salud de una narrativa suele significar una crisis profunda de la realidad que la inspira, sino, más bien, por la vida de la novela.”, Mario Vargas Llosa, “Novela primitiva y novela de creación en América Latina”, *Revista de la Universidad de México*, Vol. XXIII, no. 10, 1969, p. 36.

In fact, in the socialist Bloc, there was a significant temporal advantage over the West in recognizing Latin American literature as “world literature,” that is, literature capable of being exported and promoted as a collective phenomenon. The disparity in the penetration of Latin American culture between the socialist countries and the “central” (Western) ones gives rise to the notion of two distinct Latin American *booms*, as suggested by Pablo Sánchez, who claims that we might speak of an “*otro boom*” in the socialist countries¹².

To illustrate this assertion, the most compelling example is the comparison between the Romanian and French cases. In France, the literary discovery of Latin America began only in the early twentieth century¹³ and was shaped by Parisian exoticizing expectations rooted in the romantic invention of exoticism, which projected onto regions perceived as simultaneously distant and different – namely Africa, Asia, and Latin America. The reserved reception of Rubén Darío in France, subtly analysed by Sylvia Molloy¹⁴, stems from the operation of stereotypes, as encapsulated in Valéry Larbaud’s observation:

We do not ask them [Latin American poets] for poems of the *Cartier Latin* [...] but] visions of tropical villas, white and voluptuous cities of the Antilles, [...] the spectacle of nature, the exotic note, the sadness, the melancholy and also the tedium that emanates from certain Andean landscapes.¹⁵

Gustavo Guerrero wryly notes that the first chapter of any history of the world reception of Latin American literature should be titled “The Failure of Darío” [*El fracaso de Darío*], since the failure to understand Darío’s poetic originality in French culture indelibly shaped the fate of all Latin American literature abroad. After World War II, Latin American writers selected for translation into French continued to be framed in traditional exoticist expectations and were influenced by the individual cultural biases of gatekeepers. For instance, Roger Caillois sought to impart a documentary and ethnographic approach to Gallimard’s « Croix du Sud » collection as part of a postwar disciplinary,

¹² Pablo Sánchez, “Un experimento literario de la Guerra Fría en el mundo hispánico: Comiendo en Hungría.” *La palabra*, no. 4, 2024, p. 7.

¹³ Sylvia Molloy, *La Diffusion de la littérature hispano-américaine en France au XXe siècle*, Paris, PUF, 1972; Claude Fell, “La revue Mundo Nuevo, catalyseur du « boom » latino-américain”, *Cahiers de l’UFR d’Etudes Ibériques et Latino-américaines*, 1990, p. 163–172.

¹⁴ Sylvia Molloy, *op. cit.*, p. 58–79.

¹⁵ *Apud* Gustavo Guerrero, “Nueva narrativa del extremo Occidente”, *Letras libres*, no. 64, 2007, p. 24.

pedagogical, and popularizing agenda¹⁶, whereas at Seuil, Claude Durand and Severo Sarduy oriented their selections toward the “actual”, emphasizing formal experimentalism¹⁷.

The late penetration of Latin American literature in France – where, as Sylvia Molloy noted, French critics did not clearly distinguish between Spanish and Latin American literary traditions until after World War I¹⁸ – only partially explains the limited Latin Americanist tradition in Romania. Undoubtedly, it would have been nearly impossible for a country sarcastically labeled in the 1920s as a “French cultural colony”¹⁹ to be ahead of Paris, the very “center” of Western culture, in terms of literary recognition of Latin America. During the interwar period, the dissemination of Latin American literature in Romania was confined to a few translations of post-Romantic poetry published in cultural magazines²⁰. Despite their limited number, these translations do not necessarily reflect a nascent Gallic interest in Latin American poetry; rather, they indicate the influence of a trend imposed by several Romanian critics who, from the mid-nineteenth century modernization period to the early twentieth century, advocated for the young Romanian culture to engage not only with “central” but also “peripheral” cultures²¹. Had a different cultural trajectory been

¹⁶ Gustavo Guerrero, “« La Croix du Sud » (1945–1970): génesis y contextos de la primera colección francesa de literatura latinoamericana”, in Gesine Muller, Jorge J. Locane and Benjamin Loy (eds.), *Re-mapping World Literature. Writing, Book Markets and Epistemologies between Latin America and the Global South*, Berlín/Boston, De Gruyter, 2018, p. 204.

¹⁷ Gersende Camenen, “El momento latinoamericano de Seuil. La colección Cadre vert de Claude Durand y Severo Sarduy (1967–1979)”, in Gustavo Guerrero and Gersende Camenen (eds.), *La literatura latinoamericana en versión francesa*, Berlín/Boston, De Gruyter, 2022, p. 205.

¹⁸ Sylvia Molloy, *op. cit.*, p. 22: “Pour le moment, la critique française ne semble tenir compte que du domaine linguistique: Larreta, Gómez Carillo, Darío et les autres sont des Espagnols, d’Amérique si l’on veut, mais tout compte fait des Espagnols. Il faudra attendre l’après-guerre, lorsque les rapports plus étroits s’établiront entre les écrivains hispano-américains et les écrivains français, pour que ceux-ci comprennent que des très grandes différences séparent désormais la littérature d’Espagne de celle de ses anciennes colonies”.

¹⁹ B. Fundoianu, *Imagini și cărți*, București, Minerva, 1980 [1922], p. 25.

²⁰ In the interwar period, translations of Spanish lyric poetry were, obviously, much more numerous compared to Latin American literature. Between 1930 and 1946 one can mention only a few pioneers in the translation of this literature, including some poems published in the cultural magazines: by the Romanist Ovid Densusianu, translator of Santos Chocano, by the poet Ion Pillat and the Hispanist Popescu-Telega as translators of Rubén Darío (Iordan Iordan, Paul Alexandru Georgescu, *Los estudios hispánicos en Rumania*. București, Sociedad rumana de lingüística románica, 1964, p. 25), and by E. Schileru as translator of Amado Nervo.

²¹ Andrei Terian, “Translating the World, Building the Nation: Microtheories of Translation in Romanian Cultural Criticism (1829–1948)”, in Maria Sas, Ștefan Baghiu, Vlad Pojoga (eds.), *The*

followed, these tentative beginnings of a Romanian-Latin American cultural dialogue – mediated through Paris – might have developed into a tradition. However, this possibility was decisively thwarted after World War II by the literature promoted by the Soviet propaganda apparatus.

Indeed, in socialist Romania, Latin American literature spread through Soviet efforts to import literature into the socialist Bloc. Translations enjoyed a maximalist approach in the book market during this period: large print runs, multiple reprints, and widespread dissemination. The titles exported by the USSR included not only Russian or Soviet literature but also works from peripheral cultures – Asian, Latin American, African – as well as left-wing authors from the United States and France²². Thus, a positive consequence of Soviet translation policies was the opening of Romanian culture to the Global South, especially considering that until World War II, translations were practically limited to works from Western cultures and, to a much lesser extent, from neighboring cultures such as the Serbian, Bulgarian, and Hungarian²³. Evidently, the selection of translated authors was ideologically driven, privileging affinity with socialist realism.

For example, when Borges' *Ficciones* and Rómulo Gallegos' *Doña Bárbara* appeared in Gallimard's « Croix du Sud » collection in 1951, Romania had already made significant advances: Jorge Amado's *Terra Violente* and *As Terras do Sem Fim* were translated in 1946 and 1948 respectively; in the Spanish-speaking sphere, Jorge Icaza's *Huasi-pungo* and a fragment of Alfredo Varela's *El río oscuro* were translated in 1948; in 1949, fragments of Amado's *Jubiabá* and *Terras Sem-Fim* followed; and throughout the 1950s, multiple titles by Jorge Amado accumulated, including *São Jorge dos Ilhéus* (1950), *O Cavaleiro da Esperança* (1951), *Seara Vermelha* (1952), and *Os Subterrâneos da Liberdade* (1957). From the Spanish-speaking world, critical realist works such as *Mamita Yunai* by Costa Rican Carlos Luis Fallas (1956), *El hijo del salitre* by Volodia Teitelboim (1956), *Fronteras al viento* by Uruguayan Alfredo Dante Gravina (1956), *Lautaro, joven libertador de Arauco* by Chilean Fernando Alegría (1957), and the complete translation of *El río oscuro* by Alfredo Varela (1958) were also published. In total, between 1947

Culture of Translation in Romania/ Übersetzungskultur und Literaturübersetzen in Rumänien, Berlin, Peter Lang, 2018, p. 22–24.

²² Ștefan Baghiu, "Translating Novels in Romania: The Age of Social Realism. From an Ideological Center to Geographical Margins", *Studia UBB Philologia*, LXI, no. 1, 2016, p. 5.

²³ *Idem*, p. 15.

and 1960, about thirty Latin American novels were translated and published in Romania²⁴.

These authors and novels circulated widely in the European socialist space. The prominent presence of Jorge Amado's works, one of the most dedicated *fellow travelers* in the immediate postwar period and a central figure in the canon of world communist literature²⁵, stands out. Equally notable is the Argentine author Alfredo Varela, translated into no fewer than fifteen languages²⁶. For the Slovak context, at least, Varela was not merely an *auteur engagé* but a pioneer in revealing the richness of Latin American literature's stylistic innovations and narrative constructions – innovations that the Latin American literary *Boom* would later confirm²⁷.

Whatever success some of these prose works may have achieved, it is poetry that truly dominated the landscape of translations from American Spanish during the first stage of the communist regime, clearly reflecting the gradual shift away from the strict slogans of socialist realism between 1945 and 1964.

²⁴ *Idem*, p. 17.

²⁵ Jorge J. Locane, *op. cit.*, p.193.

²⁶ Eva Palkovicova "La literatura hispanoamericana en el contexto literario y cultural eslovaco del siglo XX", *Cuadernos del CILHA*, no. 28, 2008, p. 69–84.

²⁷ Eva Palkovicova identifies the 1951 translation of Varela's *El río oscuro* as "a real milestone," noting that its significance extended beyond ideological considerations to encompass important aesthetic contributions as well. She explains: "First, it introduced new themes into Slovak-translated literature, such as the exotic environment of the South American jungle, erotic scenes, the struggle of human passions and weaknesses, and the traditional theme of civilization versus barbarism. It also presented a rich vocabulary spanning multiple linguistic registers, including standard and substandard Argentine Spanish, vulgarisms, dialectalisms, expressions from indigenous languages and Portuguese, untranslatable lexicon, and terminology related to professional activities unfamiliar to our country. Secondly, from an aesthetic and literary perspective, it exemplified a fragmentary text in which multiple textual units of different genres and styles were employed – a narrative mode that would become increasingly prevalent in Latin American literature throughout the 1950s and 1960s." (*Idem*, p. 75).

In Romania – a country Varela visited in 1949 and 1953, where his abusive arrest in 1950 prompted, in the local press, a vigorous campaign of criticism against the perpetrators, which published numerous articles, poems, and other texts – the novel *El río oscuro* received two critical reviews. One, published in *Steaua*, praised this "creation of great epic vigor" for its "poetic value" and "frank style stripped of preciousness [...] with] an irresistible eloquence typical of the manifesto." However, despite this generally positive appraisal, the review reproached the novel's conclusion for being diluted by "a somewhat didactic insistence" (Modest Moraru, "Alfredo Varela: *Râul negru* (E.S.P.L.A., 1958)", *Steaua*, no. 7, 1958, p. 101). When considered alongside the reference to a "manifesto" tone, this critique may suggest the presence of veiled criticism expressed through esopic language.

In previous studies, we highlighted the significant role of Pablo Neruda in the global spread of Latin American poetry and examined how the early communist regime, guided by Soviet cultural policies, used translated poetry for political ends. Although, as shown in the aforementioned works, the large volume of propagandistic Latin American poetry translated between 1945 and 1964 had limited influence on Romanian culture, its reception nonetheless moved toward freeing itself from ideological clichés, coinciding with Romanian culture's gradual reclaiming of aesthetic independence.

A pertinent example of this shift is the enthusiasm inspired by the Peruvian poet César Vallejo in A.E. Baconsky, one of the main advocates of cultural *desovietization*. When Baconsky introduced Vallejo for the first time in 1960 in the magazine *Steaua*, he notably did not emphasize Vallejo's communist militancy, nor did he reference his travels to the USSR or his novel *El tungsteno* (1931) – written in the vein of critical realism and translated in several socialist countries. Instead, Baconsky translated two of Vallejo's poems that contrasted sharply with the propagandistic poetry typical of the period, one drawn from Vallejo's most experimental book, *Trilce* (1922). He also praised the concentration and density of Vallejo's verse, contrasting it with “the plethoric discursiveness of much of Latin American poetry, whose typical representative is his emulus and friend, Pablo Neruda”²⁸.

Twelve years later, in his *Panorama de la poesía contemporánea*, a selection of Western High Modernist poetry, Baconsky included the Latin American poets he considered most significant – Jorge Luis Borges, Gabriela Mistral, Vicente Huidobro, and César Vallejo – while explicitly expressing his aversion to Neruda's poetry, thereby justifying the Chilean poet's exclusion: “Excuse me, his dilated phrases, including his metaphorical material of impressive alluvium, have never meant much to me”²⁹. Baconsky's unequivocal preference for Vallejo over Neruda reflected not only a personal taste but also his broader antipathy toward the dogmatic poetry Neruda espoused during a certain phase of his career – a poetry that Romanian gatekeepers had faithfully translated under Soviet ideological directives.

Beyond Romania, the decline of Neruda's prominence alongside Vallejo's rising fame was also observable in Latin America itself. Saúl Yurkievich's study of the *Casa de las Américas* poetry awards reveals that Neruda's followers were

²⁸ A. E. Baconsky, “César Vallejo”, *Steaua*, no. 2, 1960, p. 82–84.

²⁹ A. E. Baconsky, *Panorama poeziei universale contemporane*, București, Albatros, 1972, p. 17.

honored only during the first three years of the prize's existence, while from 1964 onward, the award predominantly recognized poets influenced by Vallejo³⁰. Teodosio Fernández attributes this transformation in Latin American sensibility to a crisis of "a certain vision of America: that of the cosmogonic Neruda who coexisted in *Canto General* with the political and historical Neruda born in the heat of the Spanish Civil War"³¹. Despite arising from different contexts, tastes in two geographically distant spaces – the Eastern Bloc and Latin America – evolved in parallel, in contrast to the West, as revealed by the canonization of Neruda in the "central" cultures through the Nobel Prize awarded to him in 1971.

The translation of Latin American poetry during this period was not merely an effect of obedience to Soviet cultural guidelines. A particularly notable event was the 1961 publication of a substantial anthology – nearly 800 pages – of Latin American poetry, selected by Jesualdo, a relatively obscure Uruguayan pedagogue who visited Romania in 1957 as part of his political pilgrimage through communist countries in Europe and Asia. This anthology was unique to Romania; it was not replicated in other Socialist Bloc countries nor in the USSR. The volume was translated by a sizable group of Romanian translators – most of whom produced high-quality renditions – including N. Argintescu-Amza, A.E. Baconsky, Teodor Balș, Mihai Beniuc, Radu Boureanu, Ștefan Augustin Doinaș, Geo Dumitrescu, Ion Frunzetti, Paul Alexandru Georgescu, Tașcu Gheorghiu, Edgar Papu, Al. Philippide, Veronica Porumbacu and Romulus Vulpescu. The publication of the anthology had a significant impact: from 1962 onwards, increasingly sophisticated and erudite syntheses on Latin American poetry began to appear in the Romanian cultural press. These articles, written by intellectuals not necessarily specialized in Latin American literature – such as A.E. Baconsky, Mircea Ivănescu, Romulus Vulpescu, and Șerban Cioculescu – attest to the assimilation of Latin American poetry in Romanian culture, at least in its lyrical dimension. Simultaneously, this phenomenon confirms Kristal's assertion of the preeminence of Latin American poetry over prose, at least until 1960, and underscores the genre's pivotal role in the globalization of Latin American literature, despite the significant losses suffered in the translation process.

Thus, it can be affirmed that what translators and commentators of Latin American poetry ultimately achieved was a highly significant cultural act,

³⁰ Saúl Yurkievich, "Prólogo". *Poesía hispanoamericana 1960–1970 Antología a través de un certamen continental* (segunda edición), México: Siglo XXI, 1976, p. 7.

³¹ Teodosio Fernández, "Pablo Neruda, poesía y política", *América sin nombre*, no. 1, 1999, p. 18.

preparing the ground for the reception of the Latin American prose writers of the *Boom* in Romania. The horizon of expectation was fertilized by poets such as Pablo Neruda, Nicolás Guillén, César Vallejo, and Raúl González Tuñón. While this poetry may initially have functioned as propagandistic “noise” alongside other “progressive” literature translated from the five continents, its aesthetic achievements gradually positioned it as the first major literary discovery of Latin America in socialist Romania.

3. The cultural Cold War in Latin American Literature and the Romanian Stance

The “communist world literature”, as Jorge J. Locane terms it, contrasting it with the “capitalist” globalization associated with the Latin American *Boom*, is a phenomenon that, between the late 1940s and early 1960s, produced a first significant homogenization of the translation landscapes across the European socialist countries concerning the importation of Latin American literature. A second, albeit shorter, phase of convergence between these countries, as regards the importation of Latin American literature, occurred in the early 1960s under the influence of the Cuban Revolution: Cuban novels of social criticism – generally promoted by *Casa de las Américas* – such as *Bertillón 166* by José Soler Puig, *Tigres y caimanes* by Dora Alonso, and *Aventuras del soldado desconocido* by Pablo de la Torrente-Brau (now largely forgotten), were translated into nearly all languages of this part of Europe. The third phase of convergence began in the mid-1960s, reaching its apex in the 1970s and early 1980s. Following a cultural thaw and an atmosphere of increased ideological liberalization, authors such as Borges and representatives of the Latin American *Boom* entered the Eastern Bloc literary space, thus synchronizing the socialist cultures with their Western counterparts in this regard.

Recent scholarship – such as Jean Franco’s *The Decline and Fall of the Lettered City: Latin America in the Cold War* (2002), Germán Alburquerque’s *La trinchera letrada: Intelectuales latinoamericanos y la Guerra Fría* (2011) and Patrick Iber’s *Neither Peace nor Freedom: The Cultural Cold War in Latin America* (2015) – has made clear the extent to which the circulation of Latin American literature during the Cold War was sponsored and shaped by the cultural policies of the main Cold War rivals. As is now well-known, each superpower supported organizations with simultaneous cultural and political objectives: the World Peace Council (founded in 1947) for the Soviet Union

and the CIA-funded Congress for Cultural Freedom (established in 1950) for the United States. Franco summarizes:

The United States staged its cultural interventions during the Cold War as a defense of freedom against censorship, while on an altogether different plane, in what was pitched as a war of “values”, the Soviet Union defended a realism in which the “real” was defined as class struggle and “peace” became a political tactic. As far as the United States was concerned, there was a distinct advantage when the autonomy of art and the freedom of the artist could be pitted against programmatic realism. The appeal to Latin Americans dangled by front organizations, such as the Congress for Cultural Freedom, was not only freedom but inclusion in “universal” culture, although this disguised a not-so-subtle attack on national, ethnic, and local cultures, which were denigrated as aberrant, as merely provincial, or as idiosyncratic.³²

Vargas Llosa’s 1969 article discussed in the above text, takes on a different dimension when read in light of Franco’s insightful observations – especially considering that the Peruvian writer was among the most active and celebrated contributors to *Nuevo Mundo*, a magazine directed from Paris by the Uruguayan critic Emir Rodríguez Monegal, which operated – without its director’s knowledge – with CIA funding³³.

Aware of the inherent simplifications that obscure the contradictions, evolutions, and occasional renunciations of ideological positions throughout the Cold War, Alburquerque constructs an ideological map of Latin American intellectual life during this period. Although his focus is on the broader category of “intellectuals” as key disseminators of ideological positions – often more influential than politicians themselves³⁴ – the frequent overlap between intellectuals and writers makes his schema particularly useful for literary studies. On the left of this spectrum stand intellectuals (writers) who were steadfast supporters of the USSR: established communists such as Juan Marinello, Diego Rivera, Nicolás Guillén, and Jorge Amado; later, the poet Pablo Neruda and architect Óscar Niemeyer – both affiliated with the Communist Party after 1945. Cuban intellectuals shifted decidedly to the political left only in

³² Jean Franco, *op. cit.*, p 1–2.

³³ *Idem*, p. 43–50. Germán Alburquerque, *La trinchera letrada. Intelectuales latinoamericanos y Guerra Fría*, Santiago, Ariadna, 2011, p. 169–175.

³⁴ Germán Alburquerque, *op. cit.*, p.19.

the 1970s³⁵. Most intellectuals occupied a centrist position characterized by progressive ideals and occasional sympathy for communist ideas, while opposing their implementation as in the USSR. This centrist stance allowed for nuance and ideological diversity: among the *Boom* writers, Octavio Paz and Vargas Llosa are positioned further right, Carlos Fuentes occupies a central position, and Julio Cortázar and Gabriel García Márquez lean more to the left³⁶. On the right are intellectuals who were openly hostile to the USSR and sometimes sympathetic to the United States, despite the latter's widespread unpopularity in Latin America due to its interventionist policies; this group includes Germán Arciniegas, Luis Alberto Sánchez, Mariano Picón Salas, Juan Liscano, and Jorge Luis Borges³⁷.

The circulation of Latin American literature during this era was deeply shaped by the complex network of cultural institutions that supported intellectuals for ideological reasons. These networks played a pivotal role in shaping the literary canon that foreign translators, editors, and critics drew upon when selecting authors to introduce into their national cultures. The Cold War rivalry generated two primary canons of Latin American literature: one promoted by the Soviet-sponsored World Peace Council, which foregrounded communist poets such as Neruda, Nicolás Guillén, and Raúl González Tuñón alongside storytellers of social-realist orientation; and the other, fostered by the CIA-backed Congress for Cultural Freedom, which elevated authors with moderate political views or declared apolitical stances³⁸. To these two poles of canon formation – symbolically represented by Moscow and Washington, each promoting a “communist” and “capitalist” globalization of Latin American literature respectively – should be added, especially from the 1960s onward, Havana, with its *Casa de las Américas*, an institution committed to the cause of emancipation and which “situated Latin America as an ally of other Third World nations in the struggle against imperialism”³⁹.

In socialist Romania, from the period of the thaw onward (from the 1960s), authors spanning the entire political spectrum were translated, and the selection

³⁵ *Idem*, p. 26.

³⁶ *Idem*, p. 29.

³⁷ *Idem*, p. 31.

³⁸ Brian James Baer, “A Tale of Two Canons: The Making of Latin American Literature as World”. *Translating Socialism. International Symposium*, Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, 18 October 2022.

³⁹ Jean Franco, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

of authors was freely inspired by both the “communist” and “capitalist” literary canons, with a noticeable preference for the Western canon. The thaw represents the culmination of Romania’s cultural reconnection with the West – a phenomenon reflected in the diverse landscape of translations into Romanian⁴⁰. During this period, not only were the major figures of High Modernism – Proust, Kafka, Woolf, Faulkner, Joyce, Musil, Thomas Mann – “recovered”, but Romanian culture also “caught up” by translating authors associated with the most innovative contemporary movements, such as the Nouveau Roman, Italian neorealism, and the Beat Generation. Regarding Latin American literature, it can be argued that the transition from the “communist” to the “capitalist” canon was facilitated by this symbolic return to Europe. Whereas the initial postwar connection between Romania and Latin America was framed as a relationship between cultural peripheries – a status deeply humiliating for traditionally philo-Western and Russophobic Romanians⁴¹ – the introduction of *Boom* literature during the thaw was experienced by Romanian intellectuals as an important gesture of long-desired reconnection and synchronization with the Western cultural “center”.

Focusing on the period 1965–1971 and the translations of “central” *Boom* authors published by Romanian publishing houses, we note the appearance of *El túnel* by Ernesto Sabato (1965)⁴²; *El siglo de las luces* by Alejo Carpentier (1965); *El coronel no tiene quien le escriba* (1967); *La muerte de Artemio Cruz* by Carlos Fuentes (1969); the anthology of selected short stories from *Bestiario* and *Las armas secretas* under the title *Sfârșitul jocului* (*The End of the Game*) by Julio Cortázar (1969); *Pedro Páramo* and *El llano en llamas* by Juan Rulfo (1970); and *Cien años de soledad* (1971). While this editorial output may seem modest in volume, it was supplemented by significant space devoted to Latin American literature in major cultural magazines, including *România literară* and *Viața Românească* in Bucharest, as well as *Steaua* and *Tribuna* in Cluj, *Cronica* and *Convorbiri literare* in Iași, *Ateneu* in Bacău, *Tomis* in Constanța, and *Orizont* in Timișoara. Undoubtedly, the magazine *Secolul 20* played a

⁴⁰ Ștefan Baghiu, “Strong Domination and Subtle Dispersion: A Distant Reading of Novel Translation in Communist Romania (1944–1989)”, in Maria Sass, Ștefan Baghiu, Vlad Pojoga (eds.), *The Culture of Translation in Romania / Übersetzungskultur und Literatursetzen in Rumänien*. Berlin, Peter Lang, 2018, p. 63–84.

⁴¹ Katherine Verdery, *National Ideology under Socialism*. Berkeley, Los Angeles/London, University of California Press, 1991, p. 122.

⁴² The years indicated in brackets refer to the publication of the translations by Romanian publishers.

pivotal role in the dissemination of the Latin American *Boom* and cannot be overlooked⁴³.

Despite this surge in interest and publication, a broader look at the translation-scape of Latin American literature in Romania during the thaw period reveals a more complex picture. Alongside the translations of *Boom* writers, works of social criticism continued to appear – notably, *Lautaro, joven libertador de los araucanos* by Fernando Alegría was reissued in 1970. In addition, several prominent works recognized by the *Casa de las Américas Prize* were translated into Romanian. These works aligned with a left-leaning canon more committed to Third World anti-imperialist struggles, with Havana serving as the symbolic center of consecration⁴⁴. However, this “leftist” canon was not imposed solely due to ideological alignment – as may have been the case in the earlier Stalinist period – but rather reflected the need for Romanian cultural actors to orient themselves when selecting what was considered at the time the most valuable of an *in fieri* literary field. The search for literary value often led to hybrid selection criteria. For example, Romanian gatekeepers also drew upon the “Western” canon shaped by awards such as the Biblioteca Breve, as seen in the translation of *Los albañiles* by Vicente Leñero (awarded in 1963, translated in 1970).

The editorial landscape also included translations of foundational Latin American classics: *Facundo* by José Domingo Sarmiento (1967), *Raza de bronce* by Alcides Arguedas (1967), *Los de abajo* by Mariano Azuela (1969), and *Canaima* by Rómulo Gallegos (1966). Alongside these canonical texts, several titles – largely forgotten today – also appeared. Notably, three of the

⁴³ This magazine gives the most compelling evidence of growing interest for this literature: in 1967, it published extensive and erudite dossiers dedicated to Alejo Carpentier (March), Julio Cortázar (August), and Jorge Luis Borges (September). In 1968, translations of short stories by Cortázar, Borges, Bioy Casares and Rulfo appeared, followed in 1969 by another dossier devoted to Borges. In 1970, a penetrating essay on Borges’s concept of metaphor, authored by his important Romanian gatekeeper Cristina Isbășescu Häulică, was published, alongside an exclusive interview with Gabriel García Márquez conducted by film critic Manuela Gheorghiu.

⁴⁴ Representative examples include: *La situación* by Cuban author Lisandro Otero (1966; novel prize in 1963); *Los monos de San Telmo* by Nicaraguan writer Lizandro Chávez Alfaro (1966; short story prize in 1963); *Chulleca* by Argentine writer Octavio Getino (1966; short story prize in 1964); *Cualquiercosario y otras cositas* by the Argentine-Uruguayan Jorge Onetti (1969; short story prize in 1966); *No hay problema* by Cuban writer Edmundo Desnoes (1968; not a prize-winner but propelled to fame by the debate around the theme of „socialist realism” that its 1961 publication provoked in Cuba) and *Los años duros* by Cuban Jesús Díaz (1969; short story prize in 1966).

only four Latin American women writers translated into Romanian during the communist period were published in the thaw period⁴⁵: *La noche y el barro* by Estela Canto (1965), *Los burgueses* by Silvina Bullrich (1970) and *El hotel de la Luna y otras imposturas* by Gloria Alcorta (1970). Though these are three Argentinian writers of unequal talent and their presence in Romania reveals the relative uncertainty of the Romanian gatekeepers of Latin American literature during the 1960s and early 1970s in identifying representative works from a still-developing literary landscape. The difficulties are even more understandable when considering the struggles of the competing Cold War canons – Soviet, Western, and Cuban –, to which Romanians simultaneously referred when making their selections.

Despite the disruptions brought about by the *July Theses* of 1971 – Ceaușescu's ideological directive that intensified nationalist discourse and reinforced the personality cult – Romanian intellectuals committed to the principle of aesthetic autonomy maintained sufficient cohesion to resist the full subordination of culture to the ideological apparatus. As Katherine Verdery subtly observes, the field of history was the most severely affected by this renewed politicization, while literature, although also targeted due to the central role of writers and critics in shaping public values, was influenced more profoundly by economic constraints than direct censorship: “Literature was also privileged, owing to the central role of critics and writers in formulating and disseminating values to the public at large, but literary production was more deeply affected than history by self-financing”⁴⁶. Indeed, as confirmed by numerous cultural figures of the period whom we had the opportunity to interview – such as Andrei Ionescu, Dan Munteanu Colán and Mihai Cantuniaru – the major obstacle cited was not censorship *per se*, but rather the state's increasing reluctance to pay royalties for translations. Even in this restrictive context, Latin American literature continued to be translated and published at a steady pace. In fact, the

⁴⁵ The other author translated is the Cuban Dora Alonso, whose work *Tierra inerme* won the Casa de las Américas novel prize in 1961. Its prompt translation into Romanian, in 1962, is a faithful reflection of the interest aroused by the literature of the Island, and furthermore, the book's theme – the misery, oppression, and despair of peasants subjected to the abuses of provincial bosses between the 1940s and 1950s – corresponds to the type of social denunciation literature considered most interesting for acclimatization to Romanian culture. In fact, the novel was also translated into Russian and Hungarian (in 1963) and seems to have been a successful Cuban cultural export (Zsuzanna Csikós, “La recepción del *boom* latinoamericano en Hungría: algunas aportaciones”. *Cuadernos del CILHA*, no. 28, 2018, p. 17–33).

⁴⁶ Katherine Verdery, *op. cit.*, p. 116.

1970s marked the quantitative peak of Latin American literary translations in Romania, with 99 titles published between 1970 and 1979 – a sharp increase compared to the preceding decades (3 titles between 1945–1949; 9 between 1950–1959; and 56 between 1960–1969). Moreover, their cultural visibility was heightened due to the broader publishing restrictions imposed after 1974, which limited translations primarily to classical works⁴⁷. In contrast, many of the Latin American texts selected for translation were contemporary works, often recently published in their countries of origin, and their Romanian editions frequently coincided with international editions – on both sides of the Iron Curtain.

The momentum gained in previous decades regarding the importation of Latin American literature remained largely unaffected by the ideological shifts following Ceaușescu's *July Theses* of 1971. In fact, many of the works that would become reference points in Romanian cultural life were published from this period onward. These include the anthology of short stories from *Ficciones* and *El Aleph* by Jorge Luis Borges, issued under the title *Moartea și busola* (*Death and the Compass*, 1972); Ernesto Sabato's *Sobre héroes y tumbas* (*Despre eroi și morminte* – On Heroes and Graves, 1973); Adolfo Bioy Casares's *Dormir al sol* (1974); the 1974 re-edition of Gabriel García Márquez's *Cien años de soledad* (originally published in Romanian in 1971); Arturo Uslar Pietri's *Las lanzas coloradas* (1974); the first four volumes of Manuel Scorza's *La guerra silenciosa* pentalogy (1974, 1976, 1981, 1983); Alejo Carpentier's *Concierto barroco* (1975) and *El recurso del método* (1977); Bioy Casares's *La invención de Morel* and *Plan de evasión* (1976); Alfredo Bryce Echenique's *Un mundo para Julius* (1977); Miguel Ángel Asturias's *Hombres de maíz* (1978); García Márquez's *La increíble y triste historia de la cándida Eréndira y de su abuela desalmada* (1978, reissued in 1980), and *El otoño del patriarca* (1979); and José María Arguedas's *Todas las sangres* (1979).

Published in the large print runs characteristic of the socialist era, these titles received sustained attention in the Romanian cultural press, further amplifying their impact. Their reception was reinforced by the simultaneous appearance of major works by canonical authors of the Latin American tradition⁴⁸. While

⁴⁷ Ștefan Baghiu, *op. cit.*, p. 79; Alex Goldiș, *op. cit.*, p. 247.

⁴⁸ Ricardo Güiraldes's *Cuentos de muerte y sangre* (1970) – his most famous novel, *Don Segundo Sombra*, had already appeared in Romanian in 1964 and was reissued in 1980; José Hernández's *Martín Fierro* (1972); an anthology of short stories by Horacio Quiroga (1972); Ezequiel Martínez Estrada's *Radiografía de la pampa* (1976); Ramón Meza y Suárez Inclán's *Mi tío el empleado* (1978); and Ricardo Palma's *Tradiciones peruanas* (1979).

the publication of classic authors carried the practical advantage of incurring no royalty costs, it also reflected a genuine cultural ambition to engage in a sustained dialogue with Latin America – a dialogue that did not occur to the same extent with other Global South literatures, particularly Asian and African. The often-invoked argument regarding the absence of area specialists does not entirely hold, as translators could have been selected from those trained in English or French philology. The more convincing explanation lies in the unmatched international prestige that Latin American literature enjoyed during this period.

Indeed, while the success of Latin American literature in Romania during this period can be partially attributed to the symbolic impact of the Cuban Revolution, authors from the Antillean Island were an indispensable part of the literary imports of the time. These works reflect a variety of literary styles and ideological orientations. Some were winners of the Casa de las Américas Prize – Lisandro Otero's *En ciudad semejante* (1973); Manuel Cofiño López's *La última mujer y el próximo combate* (1974, winner in 1971) and *Cuando la sangre se parece al fuego* (1977). Others belonged to the popular genre of detective fiction, such as Ignacio Cárdenas Acuña's *Enigma para un domingo* (1975), or gained international exposure due to their close connections with political power, as in the case of Raúl Roa's *Aventuras, venturas y desventuras de un mambí* (1972). Remarkably, Virgilio Piñera's *Pequeñas maniobras* was translated into Romanian in 1972, just one year after his marginalization in Cuba during the period of intensified cultural repression known as the *Quinquenio Gris* (1971–1976)⁴⁹.

⁴⁹ The term introduced by Ambrosio Fornet refers to the process of hyper-ideologization whereby “everything from hippie aesthetics to religious beliefs, through absurd theater or, of course, homosexuality, ended up becoming politically suspect practices” (Emilio José Gallardo-Saborido, “Cosido con tinta: literatura cubana, memoria y el Quinquenio Gris”, in *Asedios al caimán letrado: literatura y poder en la Revolución cubana*, ed. Emilio José Gallardo-Saborido, Jesús Gómez-de-Tejada and Damaris Puñales-Alpizar, Praga, Karolinum, 2018, p. 222). Another Cuban author affected by this context was José Lezama Lima. In 1972, Andrei Ionescu published an introductory article on Lezama Lima in *România literară*, accompanied by a translated excerpt from his masterpiece *Paradiso*. Ionescu subsequently dedicated two thematic dossiers to Lezama in the journal *Secolul 20*, in 1973 and 1985. In this case, the influence of the Western canon is unmistakable: the French translation of *Paradiso* had appeared in 1971, published by Le Seuil as part of an editorial initiative led by Severo Sarduy and Claude Durand, which aimed to “compete with Roger Caillois’s older Croix du Sud collection [...] and to impose another vision of Latin American literature – more avant-garde and contemporary” (Guerrero, *op. cit.*, p. 225). Lezama Lima’s international rise thus coincided with his growing marginalization and repression

In contrast to the international *Boom*, which privileged the novel as its defining form, the Romanian reception of Latin American literature during this period preserved a strong tradition of poetry translation. Notable volumes include Pablo Neruda's *Los versos del capitán* (1973), his first collection of love poetry to be translated into Romanian; Nicanor Parra's anthology *Los vicios del mundo moderno*; a new edition of Nicolás Guillén's *Poemas cubanos* (1976, following the first edition in 1963); and César Vallejo's *Los heraldos negros* (1979), rendered in a masterful translation by Mihai Cantuniari. The latter earned Cantuniari the Writers' Union of Romania Prize and, in 1987, the Order of Merit for Distinguished Services in the rank of Commander, awarded by the Republic of Peru.

Latin American literature continued to maintain a significant presence in Romania throughout the 1980s, despite the increasingly dire economic conditions associated with the limitations of a supply-driven economy, rather than a demand-driven one. Although the number of titles decreased slightly – 77 in the 1980s compared to 99 in the previous decade – this reduction was less severe than that experienced by translations from other literatures. While the 1970s had been dominated by Borges and García Márquez, the 1980s saw the emergence of Mario Vargas Llosa as the most prominent Latin American author in Romania. His major works *La tía Julia y el escribidor* (1985), *La guerra del fin del mundo* (1986), and *Conversación en La Catedral* (1988) were all translated and widely discussed in the cultural press. Ernesto Sabato also continued to attract critical attention with the Romanian edition of *Abaddón el exterminador* (1986), complementing his earlier translations. Adolfo Bioy Casares, another highly acclaimed author in Romania, was published with a second edition of *Dormir al sol* (1984) and the translation of *La trama celeste* (1987). Alejo Carpentier continued to garner reader praise with *La música en Cuba* (1984), *La consagración de la primavera* (1984), and *El arpa y la sombra*

within Cuba. Socialist countries in Eastern Europe responded to Cuban cultural policy with varying degrees of rigidity. In Hungary, for instance, dissident authors were effectively excluded even from cultural periodicals (Zsuzsanna Csikós, *op. cit.*), while in Romania, dissident voices such as Lezama's occasionally "slipped through", benefitting from the advocacy of figures like Andrei Ionescu, who promoted the Cuban writer with notable enthusiasm. Poland stands out as the only country in the Eastern Bloc where *Paradiso* was published (in 1979), and where Lezama Lima – despite his esoteric and baroque style – was particularly well received, with three of his works translated before 1989, see Małgorzata Gaszyńska-Magiera, *Traces of the Foreign. The Reception of Translations of Spanish American Prose in Poland in 1945–2005 from the Perspective of Intercultural Communication*, Berlin, Peter Lang, 2019, p. 88.

(1988), along with the reissue of *Concierto barroco* and *El recurso del método* in a single popular edition (1988). The re-publication of a novel centered on a dictator at a time when Ceaușescu's own cult of personality was at its height is particularly noteworthy. Equally significant is the Romanian translation of another key work in the "dictator novel" genre: Augusto Roa Bastos's *Yo el Supremo*, published in 1982 in a translation by Andrei Ionescu. The edition was accompanied by an extensive critical study that could be considered a model of erudition and critical insight managing to sidestep political sensitivities – indeed, while the Paraguayan dictatorship is briefly alluded to, the name of Alfredo Stroessner is conspicuously absent.

Somewhat ironically and paradoxically, the disconnection between editorial demand and the available supply granted translators considerable freedom in proposing titles they wished to introduce into Romanian culture. The success of such proposals depended almost entirely on the outcome of their negotiations with editors, literary agents, and the authors themselves. As a result, the eclectic translation landscape of the 1980s encompasses a diverse range of authors with markedly different literary stature, political orientations, and stylistic approaches⁵⁰.

Arguably the most significant development in the final decade of the communist regime concerning the reception of Latin American literature was the emergence of a substantial number of critical studies and anthologies – an effort that demonstrates the translators' and Hispanists' commitment to offering their Romanian readers an informed and sophisticated engagement with this body of work. In 1980, Andrei Ionescu published the Romanian translation of a foundational work of Latin American literary criticism: Pedro Henríquez Ureña's *Corrientes literarias en la América hispánica*. That same year saw the release of a collection of Latin American legends and short stories (compiled by Tudora Șandru Olteanu), a comprehensive anthology of Central American

⁵⁰ This diversity is evident even in a small sample limited to relatively young fiction writers of the time: Manuel Puig, *Boquitas pintadas* (1981); Joaquín Gutiérrez, *Murámonos, Federico* (1981); Fernando Medina Ferrada, *Los muertos están cada día más indóciles* (1981, Casa de las Américas Prize, 1972); Luis Rogelio Noguera, *Y si muero mañana* (1986, published in the *Enigma* collection dedicated to detective fiction); Antonio di Benedetto, *Zama* (1988); Humberto Costantini, *De dioses, hombrecitos y policías* (1988, Casa de las Américas Prize, 1979); Manuel Mujica Lainez, *Bomarzo* (1987); Gustavo Álvarez Gardeazábal, *El bazar de los idiotas* (1987); Germán Arciniegas, *El caballero de El Dorado* (1987); Reinaldo Arenas, *El palacio de las blanquísimas mofetas* (1988); and Fernando Butazzoni, *Los días de nuestra sangre* and *La noche abierta* (1989, Casa de las Américas Prize, 1979).

short stories (selected and introduced by Sergio Ramírez), and an anthology of Chilean poetry (edited by Darie Novăceanu). In 1983, Dinu Flămând and Omar Lara published *20 Contemporary Latin American Poets*, and in 1988, as the regime neared its end, Darie Novăceanu introduced his anthology titled *100 años de poesía cubana (100 Years of Cuban Poetry)*. Even more noteworthy are the two anthologies compiled by Paul Alexandru Georgescu with the advisory support of Germán Arciniegas: *Antología del ensayo hispanoamericano* (1975) and *Antología de la crítica literaria hispanoamericana* (1986) (*Anthology of Hispanic American Essay*, 1975) and *Anthology of Hispanic American Literary Criticism*, 1986). These two volumes, published over a decade apart but largely featuring the same authors, reflect the rapid and lasting canonization of the Latin American *Boom* in Romanian literary culture.

4. Concluding Discussion

At this point, we possess a fairly comprehensive picture of the publication of Latin American literature in Romanian translation during the socialist period. What becomes evident is the very free and eclectic inspiration drawn from the two competing Cold War canons – Paris/Washington and Moscow/Havana. What we would like to emphasize is that the acclimatization of Latin American literature in Romania responded more to local needs for canon formation than to external pressure from symbolic centers of consecration. For example, the commitment to preserving aesthetic autonomy – hard-won between the mid-1950s and mid-1960s and explored in depth in previous studies⁵¹ – is clearly reflected in the Romanian reception of Latin American literature during that period. As a result, authors translated in the aftermath of the cultural thaw entered the Romanian cultural scene unburdened by political baggage. The overt leftist sympathies of Cortázar, García Márquez’s special relationship with Cuba, Alejo Carpentier’s privileged political position, or, conversely, the anti-communist stances of Borges, Arciniegas, Vargas Llosa, and Sabato, as well as the censorship and marginalization of Lezama Lima, Piñera, and Arenas in Cuba, are conspicuously absent from the erudite studies and extensive prefaces

⁵¹ Ilinca Ilian, “Latinoamérica en la prensa cultural rumana 1959–65: La historia de una instrumentalización política de la literatura”, *Hispanic Research Journal*, no. 22 (4), 2021, p. 286–306; Ilian, Ilinca and Emilio J. Gallardo-Saborido, “Desde los « scriitorii progresiști » al *boom*: Rumania y la mundialización de la literatura latinoamericana en el orbe socialista (1964–1971)”, *Anclajes*, XXVII (3), 2023, p. 61–83.

that accompanied their works in Romanian translation. Thus, the excessive politicization of the early dogmatic period (1945–1964) gives way, during the neo-dogmatic era (1971–1989), to a neutralization of politics – at least in the reception and interpretation of Latin American literature.

In this context, consider the remarkable success Borges enjoyed from 1967 onwards, despite his lack of political alignment with the socialist Bloc. Borges's purported apoliticism – which, according to Albuquerque's framework, masks a right-wing political stance – aligned well with his Romanian gatekeepers' deliberate decision to exclude political considerations from literary evaluation, thereby safeguarding the aesthetic autonomy of art. A comparable case is Germán Arciniegas, similarly positioned on the right of the political spectrum, whose works were actively promoted by Paul Alexandru Georgescu, himself a supporter of Asturias, who occupied a center-left stance according to Albuquerque. Notably, neither the preface to Arciniegas's masterpiece *Biografía del Caribe* (translated into Romanian in 1978) nor any other Romanian editions acknowledge his staunchly anti-Soviet position, despite his directorship of *Cuadernos* – a magazine associated with the CIA-funded Congress for Cultural Freedom from 1963 until its closure in 1965. His anti-communist stance or his “moderate attitude towards the United States” (i.e., rather favorable)⁵² are omitted because, following the dogmatic excesses of the pre-1964 period, the political positions of newcomers to the Romanian cultural scene were considered irrelevant.

From a contrasting vantage point, if the impact of Cuban prose in Romanian culture is measured by the volume of reviews and critical discussion, Alejo Carpentier emerges as the most prominently represented author. *Secolul 20* dedicated an extensive dossier to him in 1967, which included his celebrated essay on the marvelous real, and his novels were translated promptly following their original publication. By contrast, Cuban works published under the immediate influence of the Cuban Revolution – such as José Soler Puig's *Bertillón 1966* (1961), Dora Alonso's *Tierra inerme* (1962), and Pablo de la Torriente Brau's *Aventuras del soldado desconocido cubano* and *Realengo 19* (1961 and 1964, respectively) – were received in the terms of the late dogmatic period, primarily for their documentary value concerning a heroic chapter of Antillean Island history. Over time, these authors were forgotten and excluded from the Romanian literary canon as representatives of influential

⁵² Germán Albuquerque, *op. cit.*, p. 143.

Latin American literature. Carpentier's appreciation, by contrast, was not due to his Cuban origins or political connections but to the literary brilliance he displayed in the post-Stalinist years with novels such as *El reino de este mundo* (translated into Romanian in 1963) and *El siglo de las luces* (1965), alongside other works that appeared and were reissued throughout subsequent decades. Equally notable is the Romanian cultural presence of three Cuban authors who stood in stark opposition to Carpentier's official status and political proximity: Virgilio Piñera, Reinaldo Arenas, and José Lezama Lima.

The presence of authors spanning the entire Cold War political spectrum in Romanian Latin American literary culture illustrates that the canon constructed in Romania neither fully conformed to the Soviet nor to the capitalist world's literary canons. Consequently, it resisted external pressures – including those stemming from contemporaneous Cuban cultural policies. Furthermore, the integration of Latin American literature in Romania, shaped during the era of communist globalization, cannot be understood through the “epic” narrative promulgated by *Boom* authors, which attributes the de-provincialization of their literature solely to writers established in the West from the mid-1960s onward. Paradoxically, the ostensibly apolitical nature of these authors' reception in Romania reflects a deliberate political stance: a refusal to succumb to communist propaganda and an insistence on maintaining aesthetic autonomy despite significant ideological pressures. This observation supports Jean Franco's critique regarding the partiality of a World Literature theory – such as that proposed by Casanova – which tends to overlook the role of international politics in shaping literary circulation beyond national borders. Similarly, it corroborates Goldiș's argument that the acclimatization of Latin American literature in the European socialist context does not align with Moretti's or Casanova's models of world literature circulation but rather reflects a selection of “forms or models according to the internal needs of the system”⁵³. This phenomenon cannot be reduced merely to a defensive posture aimed at preserving the “purity” of art from political interference – a retreat into aesthetic autonomy that entirely rejects political engagement, as if art could ever be fully detached from ideology. Rather, a clear thematic convergence between Latin American and Romanian cultural spaces emerges, so pronounced that parallel developments – such as the use of magical realism or the dictator novel – are frequently mistaken for direct

⁵³ Alex Goldiș, “The Import of the Latin American Novel in Romania: « Meaningful Voids » and Selection Principles of a (Semi)peripheral National Market”, *Transylvanian Review*, Supl. no. 1, 2022, p. 102.

literary influence⁵⁴. A perfect example is the paradigmatic Romanian magical realist short stories volume, *Iarna bărbaților* by Ștefan Bănuțescu, published in 1965 – two years before the Spanish-language publication of *Cien años de soledad* and six years prior to its Romanian translation⁵⁵. A similar case is Al. Ivasiuc's novel *Racul* (1976), set in an indeterminate Latin American country under the rule of a brutal dictator, Don Athanasios. Until that time, the only Latin American dictator novel published in Romania was Miguel Ángel Asturias's *El Señor Presidente* (1960, reissued in 1964). *Racul* was thus contemporaneous with well-known dictator novels by Carpentier, García Márquez, and Roa Bastos, which appeared between 1974 and 1975. Even the case of Mircea Horia Simionescu can be mentioned, since he stated that his vision of the world as “a library” made up of books that do not exist, thus creating a reality and a double of the world in which we live, had been forged around 1945, long before he became acquainted with Borges' work⁵⁶. Latin American literature, therefore, responded effectively to local cultural needs and demands, fostering a productive synergy between Romanian authors and Hispanist translators who introduced works that resonated with their own artistic pursuits.

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⁵⁴ Elena Crașovan, “Magical Realism Avatar in the Romanian Novel”, *Dacoromania litteraria*, no. 7, 2020, p. 41.

⁵⁵ For a thorough analysis of Bănuțescu's magical realism, see also Viorica Bold, *Realismul magic. O incursiune teoretică*, Cluj-Napoca, Ed. Școala Ardeleană, 2023, p. 277–300.

⁵⁶ Marius Chivu, “Sînt contestatarul lucrurilor pe care nu mi le explic” – interviu cu Mircea Horia Simionescu, *Dilema Veche*, no. 742, 2018, p. 14.

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STAGING SYNCHRONIZATION: YIDDISH THEATRE IN THE INTERWAR PARIS AND THE DYNAMICS OF CULTURAL NEGOTIATION

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Abstract: This article explores Yiddish theatre in interwar Paris (1919–1939) as a case study of cultural synchronization and resistance within a semi-peripheral theatrical system. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of E. Lovinescu, Pascale Casanova, and Itamar Even-Zohar, it analyzes how Yiddish theatre negotiated its position between center and periphery by adapting, reinterpreting, or resisting dominant French theatrical conventions. Through a close reading of repertoire, performance practices, and linguistic registers, the study shows how diasporic Jewish culture mobilized strategies of cultural transfer to assert its distinctiveness while engaging with the aesthetics of the Parisian stage. Rather than simply mirroring a hegemonic model, Yiddish theatre in Paris emerges as a dynamic cultural form responsive to and defiant of its environment. This approach situates the analysis within broader questions of intercultural exchange and minoritarian aesthetics, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of how theatrical systems operate under transnational and intercultural influence, and offering insight into the cultural mobility of Jewish performance traditions.

Keywords: Yiddish theatre, synchronization, center-periphery, cultural transfer, diasporic culture.

Introduction

How does a marginal stage claim cultural space? This paper explores Yiddish theatre in interwar Paris (1919–1939) as a cultural synchronization and negotiation case study within a “peripheral”¹ theatrical system. Situated in Paris,

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¹ The *center-periphery* framework—a widely adopted conceptual tool in socio-cultural discourse, used to designate structural asymmetries between dominant and marginal cultural positions—serves here as a broad analytical lens, without implying a fixed or unchanging hierarchy, and will be discussed in greater detail in subsequent sections.

then widely regarded as the cultural and artistic capital of the West, Yiddish theatre served as a performative expression of *Yidishkeyt*— the Jewishness of Eastern European, Yiddish-speaking Ashkenazi Jews—within a predominantly French theatrical space and a buoyant cosmopolitan environment.

Drawing on Lovinescu's synchronization theory and Pascale Casanova's *World Republic of Letters*, this study investigates how Yiddish theatre maintained an autonomous cultural identity while engaging dialogically with French theatrical traditions. To further enrich the discussion and address the limitations of these models, the article incorporates Itamar Even-Zohar's polysystem theory. His framework explores the internal dynamics of cultural systems and bridges Lovinescu's national focus with Casanova's global perspective, tracing how theatrical forms, performance styles, and dramaturgical conventions circulate and interact within complex networks. Together, these three frameworks reveal how stage polysystems deal with global pressures and local artistic practices, negotiating their position in a constantly evolving theatrical landscape.

By analyzing the strategic mediation inherent in Yiddish theatre's culture, this essay proposes a relational model of intercultural positioning, interrogating broader questions of synchronization, cultural hierarchy, and intercultural exchange: *How does a minor or diasporic theatre culture articulate its relationship to a hegemonic center, yet preserve its identity, and what does this negotiation reveal about the dynamics of center-periphery exchange?*

This prism offers a new perspective on Yiddish theatre as both diasporic and transnational,² emphasizing its role as a mobile, networked cultural system that mediated cultural transfers between Eastern European Jewish traditions and the Parisian cultural milieu. It reveals theatrical Yidishkeyt's idiosyncratic and versatile dimensions, particularly its relation to collective Jewish memory and its affinity with broader socio-political and artistic movements of the interwar period.

Situated within the broader framework of synchronization and cultural exchange, the paper engages directly with three thematic axes: the mechanisms

² While often used interchangeably, the terms *diasporic* and *transnational* convey distinct dimensions of cultural identity and circulation. "Diasporic" refers to communities shaped by displacement, collective memory, and a sustained sense of origin— often with a strong affective and linguistic bond, as seen in Yiddish theatre's engagement with *Yidishkeyt*. "Transnational," by contrast, emphasizes the fluidity of cultural exchange and artistic forms across national borders, highlighting the structural and performative mobility of theatre traditions like Yiddish art troupes touring from Moscow to New York *via* Paris.

of synchronization (how Yiddish theatre adopted, adapted, or resisted French cultural forms), institutional and cultural transfers (transnational migration and cultural transfers that shaped the Yiddish theatre in Paris), and theatrical representations (themes, symbols, and narratives that express evolving Jewish identity in a new cultural context).

The first section sets the stage with a brief historical and cultural overview of Yiddish theatre in the “City of Light”. The second unit explores how synchronization operates within minor theatrical systems through the theories of Lovinescu, Casanova, and Even-Zohar, structuring the discussion into three subsections—each centered on one theorist and supported by case studies that highlight how repertoire choices, institutional networks, and cross-cultural interactions shaped Yiddish theatre’s Parisian presence. By tracing these dynamics, the study ultimately sheds light on how minor and diasporic cultures assert agency within hegemonic frameworks, offering a more nuanced understanding of synchronization as a process that encompasses tension, adaptation, and innovation.

Staging Diaspora—The Parisian Setting

Between 1881 and 1939, four successive waves of immigration driven by pogroms, economic hardship, or political upheaval pushed nearly 3.5 million Yiddish-speaking Ashkenazi Jews from Central and Eastern Europe westward in search of safer, more prosperous living conditions. Before 1920, this migration was mainly transatlantic, with France serving primarily as a transit point to the United States or Argentina. However, the closure of U.S. borders in 1924, along with other factors, shifted migration toward Western Europe.

France soon became a preferred destination, seen by many as a promised land where one could *lebn vi Got in Frankraykh* (“live like God in France”). Impoverished by World War I and eager to rebuild its economy, the French Republic reopened its doors to foreign workers, reviving its tradition of hospitality. Around 100,000 Jewish immigrants—mainly Poles, Soviet Russians, and Romanians—fascinated by France, the first European country to emancipate Jews in 1791, arrived from the former Pale of Settlement and flocked to Paris, where they encountered a largely assimilated local Jewish community of around 40,000. For many of these newcomers—artists, intellectuals, and workers—Paris’ magnetic energy and euphoric chaos represented a newfound sense of freedom, which reached its peak in the interwar period during the Roaring Twenties and the rise of jazz, radio, and

talking cinema—an era that inspired Hemingway’s celebrated book, *Paris est une fête*.³ (“*Paris is a Feast!*”). The capital, already a sacred space for foreign painters and sculptors, home to the École de Paris, which brought together a generation of artists from all nationalities, also attracted writers, playwrights, and theatre practitioners of all kinds seeking modernity and artistic freedom.

Yet the euphoria was short-lived. The 1929 financial crash triggered economic and social decline, accompanied by rising political tensions and a national identity crisis that weakened republican ideals. Immigration policies grew more restrictive, while latent xenophobia and antisemitism became increasingly overt. The rise of Hitler in 1933 drove many German Jews to seek refuge in France⁴. By 1940, the freedoms of Jews in the country had progressively been revoked by the German occupiers and the Vichy regime, which made antisemitism one of the foundations of their policies. From May 29, 1942, all Jews over the age of six were required to wear the yellow star.

Upon arrival, these *goles yidn* (“diaspora Jews”) stood apart from French Jews, who were deeply integrated and committed to republican values. Initially, there was misunderstanding—if not outright mistrust—between these assimilated *Westjuden* and the *Ostjuden*⁵ from the East. The divide with their wealthier Parisian coreligionists, who were more discreet about their ethnic identity, was immediately visible, not only through language, with Yiddish as their primary tongue, but also through their often precarious socio-economic status, their religious spaces operating on the fringes of Consistory-controlled institutions, and their strong left-leaning political views. Although many gradually embraced integration, they brought with them a “national” conception of Jewishness rooted in tradition and language—*Yidishkeyt* or “Yiddishness”.

In balancing these two value systems, theatre became a crucial support for Jewish immigrants, an opportunity to gather, like at a bathhouse or a synagogue. Amid the exhilarating yet turbulent decades of interwar Paris, a thriving Yiddish theatre scene emerged, allowing the Jewish immigrants a space for artistic expression and a key site for identity negotiation. It enabled them to rebuild

³ Ernest Hemingway, *Paris est une fête!*, translated by Marc Saporta, Paris, Gallimard, [1964] 2011.

⁴ David Weinberg, *Les Juifs à Paris de 1933 à 1939*, Paris, Calmann-Lévy, 1974, p. 19.

⁵ The terms *Ostjuden* (“Eastern Jews”) and *Westjuden* (“Western Jews”) were common categorizations in the 19th and early 20th centuries. *Ostjuden* referred primarily to Yiddish-speaking Jews from Eastern Europe, often stereotyped as traditional or backward in contrast to the more acculturated *Westjuden* of Central and Western Europe. The binary was widely used in both antisemitic and intra-Jewish discourse, though it has since been problematized by historians.

their sense of self in an increasingly hostile environment while preserving their cultural roots in the face of a dominant and internationally recognized epicentre of modernity⁶.

Whereas the more assimilated “*Israélites*” preferred French productions or, at most, Jewish theatre—whether Hebrew or Yiddish—performed by prestigious touring ensembles such as the Vilner Trupe⁸, Moscow’s Goset⁹ or Maurice Schwartz’s¹⁰ Yiddish Art Theatre from New York, dedicated to preserving the canonical status of their “high” art, immigrants favoured “light” Yiddish theatre developed locally within their communities. This theatre, often reflecting the remnants of a culture left behind or forcibly abandoned, offered a familiar and reassuring memory of origins, professions, values, and traditions.

Despite the sustained efforts of a handful of ambitious local directors and high-profile Jewish cultural organizations,¹¹ the Parisian Yiddish theatre repertoire remained largely commercial. Of the nearly one thousand different plays staged in 3,600 performances during the interwar years—a remarkable figure given the modest size of the immigrant community—only about 13% could be classified as “literary” or “art” theatre, either original works from Yiddish modernist playwrights or translations from the international artistic

⁶ For a comprehensive account of interwar Yiddish cultural life in Paris, see the recent scholarly work of Nick Underwood, *Yiddish Paris: Staging Nation and Community in Interwar France*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2022.

⁷ A term used in the 19th and 20th centuries to refer to Jewish citizens in France (or in other European countries). While it appeared frequently during the interwar period, it has since fallen out of use. However, it remains in the names of certain institutions, such as the *Consistoire central israélite de France* or the *Alliance israélite universelle (AIU)*.

⁸ The *Vilner Trupe*, founded in Vilna (Vilnius) in 1915 or 1916, was a pioneering Yiddish theatre company of primarily self-educated intellectuals of working-class origin, renowned for introducing its artistic innovation and for helping to establish modern Yiddish theatre on an international scale. In 1927, the company split, with a group of actors leaving for the United States and others going off on their own in Eastern Europe. It ceased performing in 1935 when it could no longer support itself financially.

⁹ *GOSudarstvenny Evreyski Kamerny Teatr* (ГОСДЕТ)—un titre inspiré des *Kammerspiele* expérimentaux de Reinhardt—, puis sans l’épithète « Kamerny » (ГОСЕТ). The Moscow State Yiddish Theatre, founded in 1919 by Alexei Granovsky, was one of the most celebrated Yiddish theatre companies of the 20th century, known for its avant-garde productions.

¹⁰ Maurice Schwartz (1889–1960) was the founder and director of the Yiddish Art Theatre in New York, dedicated to raising the artistic standards of Yiddish drama.

¹¹ In interwar Paris, organizations such as the Kultur-Lige Pariz, YIVO (Yidisher Visnshaftlekher Institut/Jewish Scientific Institute), the Medem-Farband, the Kultur-Front, and YKUF (Yidisher Kultur Farband/Jewish Culture Association) promoted a “better” Yiddish theatre, advocating for higher artistic standards and cultural elevation. See also N. Underwood, *op. cit.*, p. 57–91.

repertoire. The remainder belonged to light genres, with *shund*—mass-produced and anonymously authored plays—accounting for 61%, while more conventional profit-driven productions represented 26%¹².

Beyond the revered *klasiker* (“classics”) of *Haskalah*¹³ influence—Mendele Moykher-Sforim, Sholem Aleykhem, and Y.L. Peretz—who are regarded as the founders of Yiddish literary culture, a handful of authors like Sholem Anski, Sholem Asch, and Jacob Gordin also occupy the artistic sphere, leaving the “popular” domain to a group of commercial playwrights, most of whom emigrated to New York. Their names—William Siegel, Harry Kalmanowitz, and Louis Freiman, amongst others—are inextricably tied to the flood of operettas that inundated the Yiddish stage.

Regardless of artistic positioning, Yiddish theatre functioned as a *diasporic* system, built on an interconnected, transnational network of playwrights and artists, from individual guest stars to itinerant troupes. Its inherent mobility and reach, spanning Europe and the Americas, made the system global and networked rather than “national,” granting it a uniquely idiosyncratic place in the international theatrical sphere. At the same time, its development, caught between artistic standing and mass appeal, reflected larger theatrical tensions in Paris, where movements like boulevard theatre, artistic popular theatre, and avant-garde experiments all vied for public attention.

This divide between “highbrow” and “lowbrow”—a schematic rather than a strict taxonomy—roughly recalled the broader landscape of French theatre, where the longstanding concept of *deux théâtres*—art versus commerce—divided theatregoers and critics¹⁴. The rise of cinema marked the end of France’s “dramatocracy,”¹⁵ drawing crowds toward film, jazz, and cabaret, and pushing

¹² All numerical data cited here are drawn from my own research, as summarized in my PhD dissertation (Michèle Fornhoff, *Le théâtre yiddish de l'entre-deux-guerres à Paris (1919–1939). La judéité mise en scène*, doctoral thesis, Sorbonne Université/Université libre de Bruxelles, 4 December 2023, <https://theses.fr/2023SORUL113>, p. 320).

¹³ The *Haskalah*, or Jewish Enlightenment, was an intellectual movement of the 18th–19th centuries that promoted secular education, integration, and modernization among Jews in Europe.

¹⁴ Levine traces how cultural forms once widely shared came to be divided into “high” and “low” categories, shaping the cultural hierarchy of modern America, see Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1988.

¹⁵ Term coined by French theatre historian Jean-Claude Yon to describe the cultural and institutional dominance of spoken drama within French theatrical tradition. It captures the historical privileging of dramatic theatre over other popular forms such as vaudeville, operetta, or melo-drama, particularly in how theatre has been theorized, archived, and canonized (« Théâtromanie,

traditional theatre to the margins of the *société de spectacle*¹⁶. The artistic and financial crisis that had begun in the *Belle Époque* deepened, driven not merely by temporary setbacks but by structural shifts toward commercialization, encouraging theatres to compete for fashionable stars and audiences, while other movements sought to redefine theatrical legitimacy¹⁷.

In this landscape, a modernist theatrical current emerged, led by directors Louis Jouvet, Charles Dullin, Gaston Baty, and Georges Pitoëff—collectively known as the “*Cartel*”¹⁸. Opposing both commercial *théâtre de boulevard* and the elitism of state-supported institutions like the Comédie-Française, they championed a more visual, abstract aesthetic while revalorizing popular traditions and exploring Russian Constructivist staging. Their fiercely loyal audiences were largely elite, drawn from Paris’s intellectual and artistic circles and culturally engaged segments of the public.

Meanwhile, artistic popular theatre found renewed momentum under actor, director, and theatre manager Firmin Gémier¹⁹—a disciple of André Antoine and a staunch Republican. Inspired by Romain Rolland and his *Théâtre du peuple*, which synthesized the ideals of an urban France politicized by the Dreyfus Affair, he founded the *Théâtre National Populaire* (TNP) in 1920, with state support. His dual mission was to make theatre both artistically meaningful and accessible to the working classes. Molière, Corneille, Beaumarchais, and above all, Shakespeare, whom he considered among the “evangelists of popular theatre,” stood at the heart of his repertoire.

The historical and cultural context outlined above—necessarily presented in broad strokes—demonstrates that Yiddish theatre in interwar Paris was more than mere entertainment—it served as a negotiated space of adaptation, dialogue, and reinvention. But how did this theatrical system operate within a

société de spectacle. Une analyse alternative de l’histoire des spectacles, *Dix-huitième siècle* », N° 49, 2017, p. 351–363).

¹⁶ Guy Debord, *La société de spectacle*, Paris, Buchet-Chastel, 1967.

¹⁷ See also Pascale Goetschel, *Une autre histoire du théâtre. Discours de crise et critiques spectaculaires—France XVIII^e–XXI^e siècle*, Paris, CNRS Éditions, 2020.

¹⁸ The “*Cartel*” was a collaboration of four prominent directors (Jouvet, Dullin, Baty, and Pitoëff) who were later joined by actor and stage director René Rocher reshaped modern French theatre in the 1920s and 1930s. Rather than an aesthetical movement, it operated as a moral and intellectual community, see Sarah Meneghello, « Paroles de privé, paroles de subventionné, concurrence entre directeurs ou destin partagé? », in Pascale Goetschel & Jean-Claude Yon, *Directeurs de théâtre XIX^e–XX^e siècles. Histoire d’une profession*, Paris, Publications de la Sorbonne, 2008, p. 55.

¹⁹ Actor, director, and French theatre manager, promoter of popular theatre and founder of the first Théâtre National Populaire (TNP) in Paris, in 1920.

dominant-French, more specifically Parisian, theatrical order? The next section examines how synchronization, cultural transfer, and theatrical representation shaped its position, drawing on the theories of Lovinescu, Casanova, and Even-Zohar—each offering a distinct perspective—to understand how Yiddish theatre negotiated artistic legitimacy vs. popular appeal, cultural autonomy vs. assimilation, global circulation vs. local belonging.

Synchronizing Difference— The Negotiation of Cultural Identity

Synchronizing with the center? Lovinescu and the challenge of theatrical modernization

The synchronization theory, developed by Romanian literary critic and historian E. Lovinescu (1881–1943), remains key to discussions on the dynamics of cultural modernization in minor or semi-peripheral literatures. In *Istoria civilizației române moderne* [*The History of Modern Romanian Civilization*] (1924–1925), he defined “synchronism” (Romanian: *sincronism*) as the process by which Romania accelerated its integration into modernity by aligning itself with the cultural forms of Western European nations, rather than evolving in isolation or following a belated national trajectory. This, he argued, was not the outcome of organic development of local traditions, but a conscious and necessary process of cultural modernization through the selective adoption of dominant Western models—often French in Romania’s case—across literature, politics, and institutions. A staunch Europeanist—famously invoking the Latin maxim *ex Occidente lux*²⁰ (“light comes from the West”)—Lovinescu had lived and studied in Paris, where he absorbed French intellectual culture and embraced values of liberal Europeanism. Contemporary French sociology, particularly Gabriel Tarde’s²¹ theory of imitation, offered conceptual grounding for his cultural program, designed to achieve a “synchronic” equilibrium between

²⁰ All quotations from Lovinescu are taken from Mária Kovács’s English summary of “The History of Modern Romanian Civilization”, Transl. Mária Kovács. In *Modernism: Representations of National Culture*, edited by Ahmet Ersoy, Maciej Górny, and Vangelis Kechriotis, Budapest, Central European University Press, 2010, p. 40–47.

²¹ French sociologist Gabriel Tarde (1843–1904) argued in *Les lois de l’imitation* (1895) that cultural and social change occurs primarily through imitation—a concept influential in early modernization theory, see Gabriel Tarde, *Les lois de l’imitation*, étude sociologique, Paris, Alcan, 1895.

Western frameworks and Romanian cultural tradition, where the Romanian substance borrowed the forms from the West. For Lovinescu, synchronization was “not evolutionary, but *revolutionary*”: a conscious, proactive, yet critical and phased strategy of overcoming stagnation and cultural provincialism. Far from seeing imitation as a sign of weakness, he affirmed that “imitation is the first form of originality” and that “any imitation, in time, gains a specific character”. In this framework, Western influence was a catalyst for cultural development, rather than a threat to national identity—a “sociological necessity” for cultures situated between East and West.

Lovinescu’s defense of cultural borrowing must also be understood in light of Romanian intellectual history. He lamented that Romanian culture, ethnically and geographically positioned at the boundary of the East (Byzantine culture) and the West (Latinity), had been “orientalized” through tragic historical circumstances, and that Orthodoxy had been imposing “a foreign liturgical language and alphabet, failing to help us create a national culture and art”. In contrast, Moldavia’s cultural contact with Poland, he argued, was “the real starting point not only of a superior culture, but also of the dissemination of the Romanian language in the darkness of Slavic and Greek Orthodoxy”. During the 18th century, the influence of the Latinist current through Transylvanian Romanian intellectuals fecundated science and further strengthened the Romanian national conscience. Synchronization, then, was a revolutionary process of “adaptation and processing” acting from the outside and aimed at generating internal cultural renewal “in the form of a state of western civilization”—a “unification through leveling” symbolically achieved with the revolution of 1848. Although Lovinescu faced strong opposition during his lifetime from nationalist and traditionalist circles, he was integrated into the national canon after 1945 and became a key reference in the aesthetic debates of the 1960s and early 1970s. His ideas were once again contested in the 1980s by autochthonist authors who accused him of undermining Romanian originality and asserting Western cultural superiority. It was only in the 1990s that his program was reintegrated within a broader framework of discussion on European modernity in Romania.

*Yiddish Theatre and French Popular Traditions:
Synchronization or Reinvention?*

At first glance, Yiddish theatre in interwar Paris appears to fit Lovinescu’s model: a “minor” or “peripheral” culture engaging with a “dominant Western

center” imposing its forms as a pathway to cultural modernization. Yiddish theatre did indeed “synchronize” with dominant French theatrical traditions, notably by consciously borrowing “popular” dramaturgical structures that shaped the Parisian stage—above all melodrama. As the prevailing genre of “light” Yiddish theatre, it infused a wide range of performances—its influence detectable even in comic or musical forms. Marked by heightened emotional expression and stark moral polarization, this melodramatic mode most clearly reflects the cultural and emotional dynamics at play within immigrant communities.

In its strictest sense, the word *melodrama*—not to be confused with the Italian *melodramma*, which in the seventeenth century referred to opera librettos or opera itself—means “musical drama” or “drama accompanied by music”. French melodrama, in particular, had a powerful influence. Coined in the 18th century and developed by the prolific playwright René Charles Guilbert de Pixérécourt (1773–1844), nicknamed *le Corneille des boulevards* (“the Corneille of the boulevards”), the genre emphasized music, heightened emotion, and moral resolution. Though it later gained a pejorative reputation, melodrama flourished in France, resurfacing again in silent cinema.

Drawing on Peter Brooks’s seminal analysis, melodrama is not simply a theatrical genre but a “coherent aesthetic system, with a repertory of expressive features and devices” that arises in moments of cultural or moral disruption. It seeks to dramatize ethical struggle through polarization, emotional excess, and expressive gesture to make visible what is socially repressed²². As Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams argue, melodrama is not merely a “low” genre, but a pervasive narrative and representational mode that operates across media and history as a flexible form through which marginalized communities have articulated trauma, identity, and political longing²³. These frameworks are particularly apt for understanding how Yiddish theatre reappropriated melodramatic tropes—not merely to entertain, but to articulate diasporic tensions, reaffirm communal values, and negotiate cultural belonging in interwar Paris.

In Yiddish performance, melodramatic frameworks thus played a particularly prominent role—not as mere imitation, but as forms reconfigured to mirror the sensibilities and experiences of Eastern European Jews, serving as potent vehicles

²² Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination. Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1976, p. VIII-IX.

²³ Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams (eds.), *Melodrama Unbound: Across History, Media, and National Cultures*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2018.

for narratives of struggle, displacement, and redemption. Always infused with song and dance, Yiddish melodrama created a theatrical landscape that balanced sentimentality with spectacle, moral instruction with entertainment. For immigrant audiences, it provided not only a welcome escape from daily hardship in an often unwelcoming or even hostile environment, but also a vital means to reconnect with the *Alte heym*—the Old Home. After a week of exhausting labor, the theatre became a surrogate *bimah* (“pulpit”), a communal space for gathering, reflection, and shared cultural memory steeped in *Yidishkeyt*—its language, *vitsn* (“jokes”), old songs, and folk traditions.

This is precisely where Yiddish melodrama defies straightforward synchronization: rather than simply replicating dominant theatrical models or importing “forms without content,” a “hollow” imitation devoid of authenticity, a critique famously articulated by Titu Maiorescu²⁴ and later explicitly challenged by Lovinescu’s synchronization theory, it reshaped them by infusing Jewish themes, references and characters, transforming a widely popular genre into a vehicle for cultural continuity and identity affirmation. What emerged was an authentic “national” voice, not least through the Yiddish language itself, which resulted in a “yiddishized” reinterpretation of dramatic conventions. Consequently, melodramatic aesthetics —emotional extremes, implausible plots, and a moralizing bent—served as a backdrop for articulating tensions, reflecting both a social and psychological engagement with what was then regarded as “modernity”.

While narrative structures or plot devices were often borrowed from French models—with interwar Paris being a hub for “literary spies” from abroad who would quickly translate or adapt the latest hits—these scripts were reworked: names and locations changed, familiar Jewish songs and dances inserted, and the tone adjusted for a Yiddish-speaking audience. Stock or slapstick characters like the *shlemiel* (“bungler”), the overbearing mother, the religious scholar, or the matchmaker were drawn from Eastern Jewish archetypes, rooted in *shtetl*²⁵ life or the urban Pale of Settlement.

²⁴ Titu Maiorescu (1840–1917) was a Romanian critic and philosopher best known for his concept of “forms without substance,” criticizing superficial cultural imitation in Romanian culture as early as 1868. Lovinescu’s synchronization theory, developed in the early 1920s, was partly formulated in response to this position.

²⁵ A *shtetl* (Yiddish for “small town”, pl. *shtetlekh*) is a predominantly Jewish settlement of Eastern Europe, typically characterized by close-knit communal life, religious institutions, and Yiddish-speaking culture.

This mode of crossbreeding was particularly common with *shund*²⁶ melodrama, the theatrical counterpart to pulp fiction, where anonymous Jewish playwrights would churn out serialized playlets by the dozens as some contemporaries put it, “like potatoes,” replicating familiar effects, punchlines, or crowd-pleasing formulas. They transposed the action from Paris to Odessa, Marseille to Berditshev, or Bordeaux to Bialystok. While many scripts were simple fabrications, others borrowed from *Haskalah* comedies, French operas, or Shakespearean drama. In *Der yeshive bokher* (*The Yeshiva Student*), also dubbed *Der yidisher Hamlet* (*The Jewish Hamlet*), references to the Danish prince surface in the simulated madness of the hero and the troubled, fraught relationship with his mother. In *Berele Bosyak*, a farcical play whose title character’s name loosely suggests a “bumpkin” or “simpleton,” the protagonist resorts to a “mousetrap” play featuring his own wretched life to unmask his father’s cruelty. And Halévy’s *La Juive* (*The Jewess*) may have influenced Lateiner’s *Hinke un Pinke* (*Hinke and Pinke*), where a Jewish heroine, loyal to her husband, is sentenced to the pyre by a Christian duke she rejected.

From Adaptation to Resistance: The Limits of Synchronization

As a way of emotional engagement with life’s crises and vicissitudes, the French melodramatic mode appeared, in its conception and representation, as a new *genre sérieux* (“serious genre”) between tragedy and comedy—what Diderot called a “drama of the ordinary”—through its struggle against evil and quest to purge social disorder. This framework did not remain confined to the French stage, it found powerful new expression in the diasporic context. With its contributions, the imaginative dramatization of life, the transgression of generic constraints, Yiddish melodrama became an engaging arena for the self-fashioning of Jewish immigrants eager to distance themselves from the Old Home while resisting acculturation or outright assimilation. Beyond the structural adaptations previously mentioned, “yiddishizing” consisted of securing *Yidishkeyt* through the twin pillars of theatrical Jewish identity: embodied Jewishness and the *mameloshn*, mother tongue, echoed through traditional song and dance.

A minority language in interwar Paris, Yiddish primarily addressed the Jewish immigrant community, as the large majority of long-established, assimilated Jews

²⁶ *Shund* refers to lowbrow, mass-produced and mostly anonymous Yiddish theatre, popular among immigrant audiences but often criticized for lacking artistic value.

spoke French. Popular Yiddish plays embraced an often caricatural “Jewspeak”²⁷ filled with folklore catchphrases repeated regardless of context but eagerly sought by a wistful audience. Proverbs (*Di hin kenen lernen fun zayere eyer*, “The hens can learn from their eggs”), insults (*Gey, un brekh dikh a beyn!*, “Go break your leg!”), diminutives (*mameniu*, “little mama”), and interjections (*Oy, vey!*, “Oh no!”) punctuated the dialogue, privileging the effectiveness of the idiom over literary sophistication. Language also underscored generational shifts: younger “greenhorns” often picked up vernacular dialect or “Daytshmerish”²⁸ Germanisms (e.g., *Großvater* instead of *zeyde*, “grandfather”) to distinguish themselves from the old ways.

Onstage, Jewishness foremost translated into a worldview rooted in shared ancestry, memory, and cultural heritage—above all, language. Its outspoken communal character drew on familiar *topoi* like family, tradition, and core rites of passage. Marriage, in particular, dominated Yiddish operetta. An unusually high number of *shund* plays followed the paradigmatic *Rumenishe khasene* (“The Romanian Wedding”)—the most popular Yiddish play in interwar Paris—with titles including the word *khasene* (“wedding”), *khosn* (“groom”), *kale* (“bride”) or *khupe* (“canopy”) in a wide spread of geographical or local variations, such as *Di galitsyaner khasene* (“The Galician Wedding”). These works encouraged spectators to relive personal memories, and, by extension, express collective identity, all while showcasing traditional songs and dances.

This “ethnic pop” functioned as both expressive framework and major commercial strategy, structuring narrative material in recognizably Jewish terms and luring theatregoers with the quantity of musical or dance “numbers” advertised. Songs filled emotional gaps, marked entrances and exits, or amplified dramatic effects. Some, such as the lullaby *Shlof, mayn kind* (“Sleep, my Child”), triggered poignant recognition scenes; others, like *Had gadya* (“One Little Goat”) or liturgical melodies galvanized communal worship and bonding. Choruses often celebrated Jewishness outright—*Freylekh veln mir zayn, kinder fun Yisroel* (“Merry We Will Be, Children of Israel,” *Ben Hador*)—while dances

²⁷ The term “Jewspeak” was coined by David G. Roskies to describe the hybrid, expressive vernacular emerging from Yiddish-inflected Jewish culture, see David G. Roskies, *The Jewish Search for a Usable Past*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1999, p. 117.

²⁸ *Daytshmerish*, from the Yiddish *daytsh* (“German”), was a pejorative 19th-century term for overly Germanized Yiddish. Often used in early Yiddish theatre, it marked characters of noble or pretentious bearing.

ranged from Hasidic *horas*²⁹ to Yemenite *stejps*, adding a sense of cultural authenticity.

More than entertainment, melodrama reinforced *Yidishkeyt* as an organic bearer of tradition in an unfamiliar world. For recent immigrants, it nurtured a nostalgic image of the *Ostjude* and deepened the divide with assimilated *Westjuden*. Yet it was the Eastern Jews who, by sheer numbers and socio-cultural energy, fueled the growth of a thriving Yiddish “popular” theater in Paris, staging narratives that reimagined their shared experience night after night.

As demonstrated, Yiddish theatre and Lovinescu’s Romanian model share important historical and conceptual ground. While separated in time—the former emerged in the mid-19th century, the latter in early 20th—both arose as responses to modernization from semi-peripheral cultural positions, engaging with dominant Western forms to negotiate their place within modernity. Lovinescu theorized this process as “synchronization”: a conscious and strategic alignment with Western (especially French) models, which he viewed not as cultural surrender, but as a path to revitalization.

Yet the resemblance ends there. While Lovinescu advocates synchronization as a deliberate and teleological strategy—one in which peripheral cultures consciously adopt dominant forms in order to align with Western modernity—Yiddish theatre complicates this framework. Its use of borrowed melodramatic conventions was not a gesture of cultural subordination or of aspiring to “catch up,” but a means of reworking dominant forms to articulate diasporic experience. The appropriation of French melodrama, in this case, was not about convergence with a central norm, but about adaptation to distinct communal sensibilities.

In this sense, both frameworks share a belief in the transformative power of external forms, but fundamentally differ in orientation: Lovinescu’s is integrative and future-oriented, aiming at civilizational alignment; Yiddish theatre is responsive and situated, using adapted forms to preserve cultural specificity and reframe diasporic tradition within the shifting and fragmented landscape of interwar Paris.

²⁹ A traditional circle dance popular in Hasidic and broader Jewish communities, often performed at weddings and celebrations. Characterized by rhythmic stomping and collective movement, it symbolizes joy and spiritual unity.

Transnational Circulation: Casanova's World Republic of Letters and Yiddish Theatre

In *La république mondiale des lettres*³⁰ (1999), French literary scholar Pascale Casanova (1959–2018) explores how literary capital is unequally distributed across the globe, reinforcing hierarchies in which some literatures are dominant while others—the *petites littératures*—remain “small,” that is, “literarily deprived”³¹. Echoing Henry James’s metaphor of *The Figure in the Carpet*³², where a motif can only be understood within the full design, and invoking Valéry Larbaud’s call for an “internationale intellectuelle”³³, Casanova contends that literary meaning emerges only when the literary field is understood on a global scale, as an interconnected whole. The geography of this world republic of letters, she posits, “is based on the opposition between a capital, on the one hand, and peripheral dependencies whose relationship to the center is defined by their aesthetic distance from it.”³⁴ Literary space is thus structured not by national borders but by oppositions between the different degrees of literary capital possessed by different national spaces—a model often compared to the political and economic world-system described by sociologist Immanuel Wallerstein³⁵.

³⁰ Pascale Casanova, *La république mondiale des lettres*, Paris, Seuil, 1999.

³¹ *Idem*, *The World Republic of Letters*, M.B. DeBevoise (trans.), Harvard University Press, 2004, p. 181.

³² *The Figure in the Carpet* (1896) from Henry James is a novella in which a literary critic searches obsessively for a hidden pattern or “design” that unifies an author’s entire body of work—a metaphor later adopted in literary theory to suggest the need for holistic interpretation.

³³ Valéry Larbaud, « Paris de France », *Jaune, bleu, blanc*, Paris, Gallimard, 1927, p. 15, quoted by Pascale Casanova, *La République mondiale des Lettres*, *op. cit.*, p. 16. Valéry Larbaud (1881–1957) was a French writer, translator, and cosmopolitan intellectual who promoted international literary exchange.

³⁴ Pascale Casanova, *WRL* (EN), *op. cit.*, p. 12. For Casanova, aesthetic distance is also measured in temporal terms: a work’s position within the literary world is assessed according to how “contemporary” or “belated” it appears in relation to the dominant norms set by the center—what she calls the “Greenwich Meridian of Literature”. This temporal standard reinforces global hierarchies, with peripheral literatures often deemed out of sync or behind.

³⁵ Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System I: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century*, New York, Academic Press, 1974. Wallerstein’s world-systems theory conceptualizes the modern world as a hierarchical system divided into core, semi-peripheral, and peripheral zones, shaped by unequal economic and political relations. Although Casanova does not cite Immanuel Wallerstein directly, her conception of a global literary space has been widely compared to his world-systems theory, particularly in its attention to uneven development and peripheral agency.

Within Casanova's literary world, Paris—and, to a lesser extent, other leading centers—functions as an undisputed cultural capital that determines literary legitimacy, while minor literatures must compete for recognition: “Paris became the capital of the literary world, the city endowed with the greatest literary prestige on earth”³⁶. This denationalized “new ‘Babel’, a ‘Cosmopolis’ [at the] crossroads of the artistic world”, she notes, “has often entailed a peculiar blindness, particularly with regard to writings from those countries that are most distant from it”³⁷. Hence, the global literary system is far from democratic but rather structured around entrenched hierarchies of prestige, where certain languages, genres, and literary traditions carry more symbolic capital than others. Writers from less institutionally dominant cultures are compelled to seek recognition by conforming to dominant norms set by major centers, forcing them to continually battle for legitimacy, either by assimilation or resistance.

Translation and the Politics of Recognition

One of the key mechanisms in this fight for recognition is translation, which Casanova views as the primary gateway for “small literatures” to access the global stage: “Translation is the foremost example of a particular type of consecration in the literary world [...], the major prize and weapon in international literary competition”³⁸—a means by which a national literature accedes to world literary spaces and enters into competition for literary legitimacy. Although Casanova's model focuses on literature, its rationale is extendable to theatre (insofar as it functions as a literary text), where Paris as *le nombril du monde* (“the world's belly-button”) was not only a literary capital but also a hub of theatrical consecration and a key node in the circulation of modernity. Much like the acquisition of literary legitimacy—what she terms *littérisation*³⁹—theatrical recognition often hinged on how well a “minor” tradition could engage with—or be absorbed into—the dominant aesthetic and institutional frameworks, thereby breaking from “exile” and catching up with its perceived *retard* or temporal lag. “Accordingly”, she specifies, “I define *littérisation* as any operation—translation, self-translation, transcription, direct composition in the dominant language—by means of which a text from

³⁶ Pascale Casanova, *World Republic...* (EN), *ed. cit.*, p. 24.

³⁷ *Idem*, p. 30, p. 34.

³⁸ *Idem* (EN), p. 133.

³⁹ *Idem* (F), p. 188.

a literary deprived country comes to be regarded as literary by the legitimate authorities”⁴⁰.

Through the prism of Casanova’s theory, interwar Yiddish theatre in Paris, despite its immense success within internal circuits, appears as a “marginal” or “eccentric” system—a *petite nation*⁴¹ (“small nation”)—constrained by language barriers, cultural distinctiveness, and exclusion from institutional structures. Its audience was primarily Yiddish-speaking, its presence largely ignored by the Parisian press, and its funding stemmed from internal networks. However, this relative isolation did not prevent it from breaking these barriers and seeking visibility beyond its immediate audience while maintaining systematic autonomy.

To understand this paradox, it is essential to revisit the distinction between Yiddish art and commercial theatre, as well as the networks sustaining each. As discussed earlier, commercial Yiddish theatre was driven by local troupes composed of Paris-based Yiddish-speaking actors, occasionally joined by visiting stars from abroad. Art theatre, by contrast, was the realm of renowned touring ensembles from Moscow, Vilnius, or New York, often supported by highly cultured Yiddishist circles, and operating within broader *transnational* circuits extending across Europe and the Americas⁴². This dual structure persisted in Paris: while art theatre gained access to prestigious venues such as the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, the Théâtre de la Renaissance, or the Théâtre de la Porte Saint-Martin—thus attracting a French and international audience and receiving considerable press coverage—commercial theatre was confined to Jewish neighborhood venues, catering primarily to an immigrant, Yiddish-speaking audience, and remained mostly invisible in French media.

Thus, when viewed through Casanova’s model, commercial Yiddish theatre functioned as a closed system, thriving on internal popularity rather than seeking external validation, and most efforts to enhance its quality came from *within*, with little explicit interest in broader recognition or assimilation into the dominant theatrical sphere. Only Yiddish art theatre, with its aspirations for artistic validation, somehow aligns with Casanova’s theory—though even here, an important tweak is needed: aside from the Paris-based PYAT⁴³ leftist

⁴⁰ *Idem* (EN), p. 136.

⁴¹ *Idem* (F), p. 148 sq.

⁴² For background on the transnational networks of the Vilna Troupe and the institutionalization of Yiddish art theatre, see Debra Caplan, *Yiddish Empire: The Vilna Troupe, Jewish Theater, and the Art of Itinerancy* (Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2021).

⁴³ *The Parizer Yidisher Arbeter Teater* (PYAT), or Parisian Yiddish Workers’ Theatre, was founded

workers' theatre, which pursued artistic ambitions, Yiddish art theatre from abroad operated through a transnational network rather than a local hierarchy. This challenges the author's assumption that artistic legitimacy flows from the center (French theatre) to the periphery (Yiddish theatre): while French theatre retained its global prominence, Yiddish theatre circulated within its alternative network between Europe and the Americas. Far from being an isolated cultural phenomenon, it was deeply embedded in migratory artistic exchanges, cross-cultural dialogues, and competing ideological currents. Although touring troupes like the Vilner Trupe or Goset exemplify this diasporic art theatre, their aesthetic influences stemmed primarily from Russian and German theatrical traditions rather than French models.

In contrast, translation offers the most direct point of interaction between Yiddish and French theatre, as it represents an explicit negotiation for visibility within the dominant cultural space. As the following case study demonstrates, the *intraduction* (in-translation), both textual and performative, of Yiddish plays into French, served as a critical mechanism for gaining visibility and testing the boundaries of artistic legitimacy on the Parisian stage.

*From Yiddish to French:
the Contested Reception of "God of Vengeance"*

Got fun nekome ("God of Vengeance") by the Yiddish playwright Sholem Asch premiered in 1925 at Théâtre de l'Atelier, a modest Montmartre venue from the early 19th century previously known for operettas, vaudevilles, and light comedies. Three years earlier, it had been acquired by French actor Charles Dullin (1885–1949) to transform it into a hub of theatrical excellence and research, prioritizing literary quality over commercial appeal. A student of André Antoine, Jacques Copeau, and Firmin Gémier, Dullin envisioned an "experimental drama laboratory" devoted to actor training, directing, staging, and design. He favoured "literary" theatre and "open characters," as Jean Vilar called them—poetic, multi-dimensional figures that transcended interpretation

in 1928 as a drama circle within the Kultur-Lige Paris, a leftist Yiddish cultural association that promoted Jewish arts, literature, and workers' education in interwar France. Initially known as the *Parizer Yidisher Arbeter Teater*, it later rebranded as the *Parizer Yidisher Avantgard Teater* to reflect its increasingly experimental and avant-garde orientation. PYAT played a fundamental role in the development of political culture within leftist circles in interwar France. See also N. Underwood, *op. cit.*, p. 92–133.

and elicit universal identification. His predilection for character roles led him to specialize in a repertoire depicting financial corruption and greed, drawing inspiration—like Gémier’s notably prejudiced Shylock—from longstanding Jewish stereotypes. Whether playing Harpagon, Mercadet, or Volpone, none of them Jewish, he favoured exaggerating mannerisms and speech patterns in ways that evoked familiar antisemitic tropes.

Asch’s *Got fun nekome*, translated by Lupus Blumenfeld, provided Dullin with yet another opportunity to indulge his penchant for controversial roles. Fascinated by the play’s dramatic potential, he had met the Polish-Jewish playwright, then living in Paris since 1915, and took a strong interest in staging the work. Originally written in 1905, the play had already stirred controversy: after its 1907 New York debut, Yiddish papers led by the Orthodox *Tageblatt* condemned it as “filthy,” “immoral,” and “indecent”⁴⁴. Its 1923 Broadway revival with a cast that included the acclaimed German Jewish actor Rudolf Schildkraut ended abruptly when the entire cast was accused of violating the state’s Penal Code, jailed for one night, and later charged with obscenity, notably for including the first onstage lesbian kiss in New York theatre history.

In a provincial Polish town, Yankl Tshaptshovitch (Charles Dullin) runs a brothel in his basement, while living upstairs with his wife, Sarah (played by Simone Jollivet, Mrs. Dullin), a former sex worker, and their daughter Rivkele. Obsessed with redemption, he commissions a Torah and arranges a pious marriage for the young woman. But she is seduced by a female prostitute, Manke, and manipulated into opening a rival brothel with her. When Yankl realizes her “fall,” he violently drags her downstairs, shouting “To the basement!” and returns the Torah to the rabbi, denouncing it as powerless against divine cruelty.

From the outset, the production was steeped in controversy. Warnings at the première advised it was unsuitable for family audiences, but the scandal enjoyed robust box office success, even as it polarized reception in the French press: some hailed the dramatic intensity and the unsettling strangeness; others condemned its brutality and Grand-Guignolesque excess. Jollivet, known for her antisemitic views, set the tone by donning a fake “Semitic nose” made of pink putty. Accordingly, Dullin, in turn, stripped the play of its symbolic, cultural, and religious layers, tailoring it to flatter antisemitic stereotypes, to the delight

⁴⁴ Scholem Asch, *Leksikon fun der nayer yidisher literatur*, vol. 1, New York, Alveltlekhn Yidishn Kultur-Kongres, 1956, p. 183–192.

of one paper that exulted: “Prodigious depiction of the turmoil and frenzy that stir the soul of Israel!”⁴⁵

His Yankl became a grotesque caricature (Fig. 1): a frenetic, ruthless figure oscillating between religious fervor and ruthless bargaining. The authoritative theatrical journal *Comœdia* observed: “Mr. Dullin portrays Yankl as a gaunt Jew with a hooked nose [...] shaken by brutal frenzies that at times feel more forced than natural”⁴⁶. Another critic lamented the plays’ poor quality, calling it “simplistic without being concise” and the staging “weak”⁴⁷.

La Rampe added, highlighting the crux of the matter: “[The play] is remarkably performed by Dullin, a picturesque and frenetic Yankl, but one *not Jewish enough*”⁴⁸. Interestingly, the Jewish press echoed and amplified this final point with *Menorah’s* columnist Henry-Marx, dismissing the play as vulgar, false, and “foreign to Judaism”⁴⁹.

A public spat between the play’s two French *transporteurs*—translators—further clouded the reception. Raymond Geiger, the “original” adaptor, accused the other, Lupus Blumenfeld, the reviewer, endorsed by Asch—of not knowing French, whereas the Blumenfeld retorted that Geiger did not know Yiddish... Reviewers panned the translation as “incorrect,” “too strictly literal” or “rather mediocre”⁵⁰—yet another reminder of the “untranslatability” of Yiddish, as Kafka⁵¹ once noted.

Not Jewish Enough or Too Jewish?

To fully assess whether Casanova’s theory explains the Parisian reception of *God of Vengeance*, we must revisit the role of translation in shaping the play’s legitimacy. Casanova argues that “small literatures” gain recognition only when

⁴⁵ *Idem*, *L’Action française*, in C. Meyer-Plantureux, *Les enfants de Shylock*, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

⁴⁶ *Idem*, « A l’Atelier—*Le Dieu de Vengeance*, traduction de L. Blumenfeld », in *Comœdia*, 23.4.1925, p. 1–2.

⁴⁷ Henry Bidou, *Journal des débats*, [s.d.].

⁴⁸ Philippe-Emmanuel Glaser, « La semaine dramatique —À l’Atelier », in *La Rampe*, 10.5.1925, p. 4. [Emphasis added].

⁴⁹ Henry-Marx, « Le Dieu de Vengeance », in *Menorah*, n°10, 15.5.1925, p. 164. [Emphasis added].

⁵⁰ « À l’Atelier—*Le Dieu de Vengeance*, pièce en 3 actes de Schalom Asch, traduction de L. Blumenfeld », in *Comœdia*, 23.4.1925, p. 2.

⁵¹ Franz Kafka, “Introductory Talk on the Yiddish Language”, delivered on February 18, 1912, at the Jewish Town Hall in Prague, in Franz Kafka, *Nachgelassene Schriften und Fragmente I*, edited by Malcolm Pasley, Frankfurt am Main, S. Fischer Verlag, 1993, p. 188 sq.

translated and validated by dominant literary centers, which impose their own criteria of legitimacy. *This* case, once more, both supports and challenges this claim: translation into French did not automatically grant legitimacy within the French system, as Casanova suggests. Beyond being shaped by the aesthetic and ideological expectations of the French literary establishment, its legitimacy remained multi-layered and subject to internal debate, demonstrating that legitimacy is multi-layered and can be contested from *within*.

God of Vengeance's Parisian reception meets Casanova's theory on three fronts. First, rather than engaging with the play on its own terms, French critics assessed it according to dominant legitimacy standards, applying French dramatic conventions instead of engaging with its Yiddish roots. Dismissed as "inauthentic," the play's reception supports Casanova's claim that minor works are judged not on their intrinsic merits, but through the aesthetic and ideological values of more institutionally powerful traditions. Second, the play's struggle for recognition highlights the power imbalance between established and emerging literary spaces: rather than being acknowledged as a major Yiddish work, *God of Vengeance* was measured against prevailing French theatrical norms and found lacking. This demonstrates how the dominant space dictates the terms of artistic legitimacy, filtering what is deemed worthy of recognition. Third, the French translation—typically a gateway to legitimacy in Casanova's model—failed to secure cultural inclusion, suggesting that translation alone is insufficient when the content does not conform to prevailing value standards.

Yet, a key contradiction in Casanova's framework arises in the *internal* contestation of legitimacy. While one might expect Jewish critics to defend the play against the dismissive stance of the French press, they too rejected it because it was "not Jewish enough". This foregoes Casanova's assumption that "small" works enter the literary world as a unified, cohesive entity seeking validation from a dominant capital, revealing instead that marginal literary spaces are not monolithic, but marked by internal hierarchies and legitimacy debates. French-Jewish critics may have assessed Asch's work against a different standard of Jewish literature—one shaped by Franco-Jewish assimilationist ideals, French literary aesthetics, or a conception of Jewish identity incompatible with Asch's Eastern European, Yiddish-speaking perspective. Some even went as far as to deem *God of Vengeance* "foreign to Judaism," exposing deeper internal fractures within the field of minor literature itself and complicating any straightforward dynamics of recognition. An additional paradox of the play's reception came from antisemitic critics who praised it for the wrong reasons. They interpreted

it not as a piece of serious drama, but as “evidence” of Jewish moral corruption, confirming their own prejudices—a selective recognition based on ideological manipulation rather than dramatic merit, making the play look “too Jewish”.

In the end, translation is a double-edged process, capable of granting legitimacy but at the same time introducing a new layer of complexity, inviting misreading, distortion, rejection, or ideological appropriation. Yiddish drama, even in translation, had to engage with multiple, divergent expectations—from the dominant French literary sphere and from within Jewish cultural debates. A French adaptation that failed to preserve Yiddish cultural nuance could explain why both Jewish and non-Jewish critics found it “inauthentic,” while antisemitic critics misconstrued it as a confirmation of their biases.

To summarize, while Casanova’s theory helps explain *God of Vengeance’s* struggle for legitimacy in Paris, the case also highlights three major complications: the internal fractures of the periphery (Jewish critics themselves disagreed on what constituted “authentic” Jewish drama), the gap between recognition and acceptance (antisemitic critics praised it for the wrong reasons), and the non-neutrality of translation (which became a source of distortion and exclusion and contributed to the play’s contradictory reception). Ultimately, legitimacy, recognition, and translation prove to be far more complex and contested processes, both externally with the dominant cultural authorities and internally, within the internal dynamics and debates of the minor literary field itself.

Theatrical Representation: Even-Zohar’s Polysystem Theory

Given the respective limitations of both Lovinescu’s and Casanova’s theories in fully accounting for the dynamics of Yiddish theatre in Paris, the polysystem theory developed by Israeli culture researcher and scholar Itamar Even-Zohar (b. 1939) offers a more capacious framework for analysis. Although first published in 1979, before Casanova’s *World Republic of Letters*, his work gained renewed traction in comparative literature and translation studies in the early 2000s—notably through Philippe Codde’s 2003 article in *Poetics Today*, which coincided with Casanova’s reception in literary studies⁵².

⁵² Codde reconsiders Even-Zohar’s polysystem theory in light of more recent developments in translation studies and comparative literature, emphasizing its continued relevance for modelling intercultural dynamics, see Philippe Codde, “Polysystems theory revisited: A New Comparative Introduction”, *Poetics Today*, vol. 24, n° 1, 2003, p. 91–126.

Whereas Lovinescu's model of synchronization presumes a linear path of cultural modernization, and Casanova emphasizes hierarchical structures of symbolic domination, Even-Zohar instead proposes a multi-layered, relational model defined by the *dynamic interaction* of multiple, competing literary and cultural *systems*. This approach enables us to consider Yiddish theatre not as a passive recipient of dominant influences, but as an active agent negotiating its place within *a network of competing, interdependent* cultural forms.

A polysystem, in Even-Zohar's terms, is a constellation of interrelated systems operating within a broader, evolving socio-cultural "ecosystem" of dynamic *networks* without linear causality. Rejecting rigid structuralist and nationalist paradigms, rejecting the idea of a fixed, hierarchical system centered around dominant canons, he proposes a multi-layered, dynamic, and interdependent model—an "open *system of systems*"⁵³ that captures variability and heterogeneity in time and place—where multiple literary and cultural subsystems coexist, shift, and influence one another. "Cultural life," he quotes, "is a multiple system, a system of various systems which intersect with each other and partly overlap, using concurrently different options, yet functioning as one structured whole, whose members are interdependent"⁵⁴.

This conceptual shift was pivotal. Rather than privileging canonical *texts*, Even-Zohar instead foregrounds the role of literary *systems*, departing from the normative binaries of "highbrow" vs. "lowbrow," and allowing for the multi-layered interplay between "canonized" and "non-canonized" forms, as well as between center and margins. Crucially, these positions are not fixed but in constant flux: peripheral systems may shift to central positions, and so-called "minor" literatures may exert influence on major ones⁵⁵. Translation becomes central to this dynamic, serving as a key mechanism for peripheral literatures to enter dominant systems. Far from being a mere philological specialty, it is an active force of innovation that not only brings minor works to mainstream readers but also shapes and influences national literary traditions: "I conceive of translated literature not only as an integral system within any literary polysystem but as a most active system within it"⁵⁶.

Importantly, the polysystem theory extends beyond literature to other semiotic fields such as language, performance, art, and broader socio-cultural

⁵³ *Idem*, p. 16.

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁵ *Idem*, p. 18.

⁵⁶ *Idem*, p. 21.

production. It thus provides a powerful model for understanding how peripheral or minoritized systems are not merely passive recipients of influence from dominant ones but also contribute to the fluid and reciprocal nature of cultural dialogue—not only by absorbing dominant norms, but also by reshaping them from within.

To showcase these bidirectional transfers between cultural spaces, the evolving notion of Jewishness itself, embodied in the figure of the “stage Jew,” performed by both Jewish and non-Jewish actors, offers a compelling case for understanding *performative* translation, highlighting that translation is not confined to texts alone but compasses staging (the director), performance (the actor), interpretation (the audience) and cultural framing (critics, press, theatre practitioners, scholars). It also demonstrates the active role the Yiddish language played within the Parisian theatrical polysystem, underscoring that the center-periphery relationship is flexible, negotiated, and context-dependent.

The following sections address these reciprocal dynamics through two perspectives—French portrayals of the “Stage Jew” and Jewish portrayals of French characters.

French portrayals of the “Stage Jew”

The concept of the “Stage Jew” refers to a theatrical stereotype that has appeared in European drama for centuries, with Shakespeare’s Shylock (*The Merchant of Venice*, 1596) being among the most enduring examples. Ranging from grotesque and antisemitic to sympathetic or even heroic, this recurring stock character has embodied shifting representations of Jewishness, shaped by cultural, political, and social change. The trope was initially constructed by gentile theatre-makers and audiences, who often depicted Jews through external, stereotypical lenses rather than through authentic self-representation. Jewish playwrights and actors later engaged with this figure, sometimes subverting, reinterpreting it for their own purposes. In Yiddish theatre, portrayals of Jews vary widely by genre, from burlesque self-mockery to tragic, multidimensional characters that transcend caricature. In contrast, French interwar theatre often presented a narrower view, relying on outdated stereotypes rather than striving for authentic representation.

French actor Firmin Gémier (1869–1933) was the first in interwar Paris to set the standards for a controversial version of the “Stage Jew”. His acclaimed portrayal of Shylock—performed successfully throughout a forty-year

career—inspired many imitators. The 1919 production at the Théâtre Antoine coincided with a period of relative calm in French antisemitism after the turbulent Dreyfus years. Yet some observers still accused Jewish banking and Jewish theatre of causing France's economic and intellectual decline⁵⁷. *The Merchant of Venice*, a comedy centered on money, thus arrived at the opportune moment, inciting some actors to interpret Jewish characters, their specialty, if not their (inter)national calling card.

Though Gémier publicly claimed he was impartial in choosing his repertoire and asserted he was a convinced Dreyfusard, his Shylock heavily relied on the antisemitic stereotypes of the era—both physical and moral—including a crooked nose, frizzy red hair, protruding ears, shifty gaze, forked beard, gnarled fingers, and a limping gait (Fig. 2). His portrayal, deeply rooted in reverence for Shakespeare, focused on a highly physical—or plastic—representation of the character, with critics noting his furtive glances, eager lip movements, and careful handling of props like the contract, the knife, and the scales. To give his interpretation the necessary visual impact, Gémier incorporated stereotypes from the antisemitic fantasies prevalent in Western collective imagination, such as phrenological features, and deliberately avoided psychological depth to make the ethnic portrayal instantly recognizable.

Despite the roles' contentious nature, Gémier's Shylock was a triumph. While the mainstream French press largely avoided referencing its antisemitic dimension—praising instead the actor's "active and optimistic genius," his "incomparable colorfulness," or even his "almost sympathetic sincerity,"⁵⁸ the Jewish press found the performance "brutal, unsympathetic—at times bordering on farce"⁵⁹.

How, then, should we assess this portrayal? While scholars continue to debate whether *The Merchant of Venice* is inherently antisemitic or merely reflects its historical context—it was written two years after the torture, hanging, and dismemberment of Queen Elisabeth's Jewish physician, Rodrigo Lopez (1525–1595), unjustly accused of attempting to poison her, there is evidence Shakespeare borrowed the infamous "pound of flesh" episode from Italian author Giovanni Fiorentino's *Il Pecorone* (1378). Perhaps, for an Elizabethan

⁵⁷ Chantal Meyer-Plantureux, *Antisémitisme et homophobie, Clichés en scène et à l'écran*, Paris, CNRS Éditions, 2019, p. 135.

⁵⁸ Jean Manégat, « Dans les subventionnés », in *La Rampe*, 1.10.1928, p. 15.

⁵⁹ Raymond Pentzell, "Firmin Gémier and Shakespeare for everybody", in *The Tulane Drama Review*, vol. 11, N° 4, Summer 1967, p. 113–124.

audience, Shylock served as a scapegoat. Nonetheless, gentile interpreters later approached the role in ways ranging from caricature to villainy.

Jewish actors, by contrast, often acknowledged the character's complexity and emotional depth. In *Shylock and Shakespeare*, Abraham Morevski of the Vilner Trupe analyzes the part from a Jewish perspective, drawing on his experience as both actor and Yiddish translator of the play. Reviewing theatrical productions from Rudolf Schildkraut's⁶⁰ 1906 Berlin performance onward, he critiques those that fail to respect Shakespeare's philosophical depth, arguing instead that the playwright consistently lends his voice to tormented, isolated figures at odds with the world around them, such as Hamlet, Othello, Falstaff, and Coriolanus. For the comedian, Shylock's iconic monologue—"I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes..."—carries Shakespeare's own voice: a plea for empathy with the oppressed⁶¹.

This understanding informed most Jewish portrayals of Shylock, which refrained from reducing the figure of the "dog Jew" to a cutthroat villain, a sworn enemy of Christians, or a comic target. Ayzik Samberg, Jacob Adler, Joseph Kessler, Samuel Goldenberg, and Maurice Schwartz—all of whom played in Paris—sought to portray the characters' dignity and alienation. Rather than relying on religious or pejorative tropes, they adopted an authentically ethnic perspective—an embodiment of *otherness* stripped of degrading caricature. Transformed into a figure of ethnical intensity, the demonized usurer came to symbolize "the inarticulate cry born of a frustrated need to be understood"⁶².

Still, Jewish characters on the interwar Parisian stage were not always figures of blame. Some non-Jewish directors sought to depict them authentically, most notably Gaston Baty⁶³ (1885–1952), who staged Sholem Anski's *Dibbuk*—a three-act play that would later attain a mythical status in Yiddish theatre—to capture Jewish mysticism. First made famous by the Vilner Trupe (Warsaw, 1920)—one month after the death of its author—and later by Evgeny Vakhtangov's Hebrew-language version for Habimah⁶⁴ (Moscow, 1922), *The*

⁶⁰ Rudolf Schildkraut (1862–1930) was a celebrated Austrian-Jewish stage actor known for his powerful performances in both German-language and Yiddish theatre, particularly in roles that combined classical gravitas with emotional intensity.

⁶¹ Abraham Morevski, *Shylock and Shakespeare*, St. Louis, Fireside Books, 1967, p. 91.

⁶² Z. Ackerman et S. Schülting, *Precaious Figurations: Shylock on the German Stage, 1920–2010*, Berlin-Boston, De Gruyter, 2019.

⁶³ Gaston Baty (1885–1952) was a leading figure in the French avant-garde theatre movement and a member of the "Cartel des Quatre".

⁶⁴ Habimah repertory theatre, founded in 1918 in Moscow by Nahum Lazarevich Tsemakh and permanently reestablished in Tel Aviv in the 1930s, was the first professional Hebrew-language

Dibbuk had already impressed Parisian theatrical and artistic circles with their performances, respectively in 1922 and 1926. Perhaps inspired by the latter, Baty introduced the work to French-speaking audiences in 1928 at the Studio, a small attic theatre beneath the roof of the prestigious Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, designing the sets himself and casting French actors Hubert Prélier and Marguerite Jamois in the lead roles.

At the heart of this mystical tale between Leah and Khonen—a young, emaciated Talmud student—is a dybbuk: the spirit of the dead that comes to inhabit the body of the living. Their Hasidic fathers, Sender and Nissan, once pledged to marry their children, but Sender, now wealthy, breaks the vow, favoring a more profitable match. Desperate, Khonen turns to Kabbalistic numerology to conjure gold, but dies upon uncovering the sacred formula. When Leah visits his grave before her wedding, his spirit possesses her. Refusing her arranged marriage, she is exorcised by the miracle-rabbi of Miropol. The ritual kills her—reuniting her with Khonen in the afterlife—“between two worlds”⁶⁵.

Rather than merely replicating the original, Baty approached the Hasidic world as a dramatic entity with its own inner logic. His ambition, as he explained, was to “restore to the poet’s work what had been lost in the passage from dream to manuscript”⁶⁶. Fascinated by this spellbinding world and convinced of his ability to communicate his sense of awe to the audience, Baty seized the opportunity to conceive of theatre as a form of civic religion—a popular gathering that transcended social classes—an ambition inherited from his mentor, Firmin Gémier, founder of the renowned Théâtre National Populaire (TNP).

Armed with his mastery of lighting, which added an unprecedented intensity to this drama of possession, Baty nonetheless drew visibly from the iconic scenographies of the Vilner Trupe and Habimah. He championed a theatre liberated from the tyranny of the text and advocated for the director’s creative rights, treating his *cahier de régie* (“prompt book”) not just as a technical tool but as a means of preserving his theatrical vision. While his costume design closely followed Habimah’s models, showcasing traditional gear and symbolic color schemes—Leah’s white wedding dress; Khonen’s velvet-trimmed caftan,

theatre and a major influence on Jewish and Israeli performing arts.

⁶⁵ The subtitle of the play.

⁶⁶ Gaston Baty, « Le metteur en scène », in Gaston Baty, *Rideau baissé*, Paris, Bordas, 1949, p. 37 sq.

white stockings, and a *tallis-katan* (“small prayer shawl”); the wonder-rabbi’s full white satin ensemble including a fur-trimmed hat, the printed original script on the left-hand pages of the director’s book is crossed out and corrected by hand in places, with corresponding handwritten stage directions noted opposite.

These corrections deserve scrutiny. While some aimed to clarify or refine the phrasing, others erased key references to Jewish tradition. Spitting to ward off the evil eye—cut. *Tikkun hatsot* (“midnight service”), a Jewish lamentation ritual recited each night at midnight in remembrance of the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, becomes “at such an hour”. Elsewhere, mentions of embroidered ark curtains are replaced with “ancient *parochets*,” removing the evocation of the richly decorated veils often donated by synagogue patrons. Similarly, *Sholem aleykhem*, which precedes the greeting “Peace be upon you,” is dropped. Ancestral superstitions, such as evil spirits “hiding in every corner, in every crack,” messianic longing, and praise of Israel, lines central to Hasidic identity—are all removed. While these deletions are sporadic and do not alter the dramatic structure itself, they do neutralize the text’s cultural references to Jewish culture, reducing its expressive power and authenticity.

Other choices speak through a series of staging “errors”—intentional or not?—involving Jewish ritual and tradition. Like the Vilner Trupe, Baty uses a stage curtain that resembles a gigantic *tallit gadol* (“large prayer shawl”)—spread out above the platform, with its sides hanging down on either side. Like *Habimah*, he places the ark center stage in the synagogue set, but whereas they place a small *bimah* (“pulpit”) with railing on the right and include only a single lectern, the French director removes the platform altogether and places two lecterns on either side of the ark for Khonen and his fellow student Henekh—a significant departure from ritual accuracy.

Some rare photographic documents preserved in the Gaston Baty collection at the Performing Arts Division of the Bibliothèque nationale de France capture key moments, allowing comparison between the Studio cast’s performance style and that of their Jewish counterparts.

A first striking example (Fig. 3 and Fig. 4) concerns the scene of Khonen’s death after learning from Sender that Leah is engaged to another man (Act I). In *Habimah*, horrified Hasidim freeze in dynamic poses; at the Studio, actors appear stunned and restrained. Khonen lies front and center, his gaze skyward; his fellow students stand stiffly, hands by their sides. Other examples include the contrast in physicality and costuming between *Habimah* and the Studio in the meeting scene with the frightened fiancé, Menakhem, and his tutor, Mendl,

who reminds him of the speech he is to deliver during the wedding ceremony (Act II); different stagings of Leah's wedding and her rejection of Menahem (Act II); and the portrayal of the rabbi of Miropol, particularly the loss of spiritual authority in Baty's version (Act III).

While limited by available sources, these frozen moments provide valuable clues to embodiment, gesture, and interactions, but—more interestingly—to the cultural coding and the interpretive intent. In this regard, Baty's omissions of *Yiddishkeit* stand in sharp contrast to Habimah's immersive, internally driven energy. His static, introverted, and austere *tableaux vivants* are visually striking, especially the exorcism scene, where the Hasidic prayer shawls form geometric rhythms with the stripes of the curtain behind them, set in stark contrast with the dark kneeling silhouette of Leah.

The French press largely praised the production. While Artaud was reportedly captivated by Marguerite Jamois's "terrifying" performance, Paul Achard described it as "hallucinatory"⁶⁷. Pierre Brisson (*Le Temps*) echoed his colleagues' admiration for the director's "meticulous artistry and his usual mastery of chiaroscuro," but noted that the first two acts dragged, calling the staging "picturesque" yet slow and tonally monotonous⁶⁸. He did, however, laud the exorcism scene for its poetic power and tragic grandeur. Others, like Lucien Descaves or Robert Kemp, dismissed the play as superstitious or alien: "These ceremonies are odious to our Western souls"⁶⁹.

Jewish critics, once again, responded differently. Maurice Brilliant lamented betrayed ritual inaccuracies: *batlonim* swaying like sailors, their psalm-chanting reduced to "soothing murmurs"; Khonen's death portrayed more as heartbreak than divine punishment, uncovering "the other name of God". He also noted a softened ending where Sender's remorse resembled Christian redemption⁷⁰. More nuanced than Benjamin Fondane of *Cahiers juifs*, who bluntly declared the play "very poorly"⁷¹ staged, *Menorah's* theatre critic René Wisner called the performance "respectful but not fervent," contrasting it with Habimah's

⁶⁷ Paul Achard, *La Presse*, 2.2.1928, in Gaston Baty, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

⁶⁸ Pierre Brisson, « Chronique théâtrale. Studio des Champs-Élysées—*Le dibbouk* », in *Le Temps*, 6.2.1928, p. 2.

⁶⁹ Odette Aslan, « Le dibbouk d'An-ski et la réalisation de Vakhtangov », in *Les voies de la création théâtrale*, N° 7, Paris, Éditions du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1979, p. 237.

⁷⁰ O. Aslan, *op. cit.*, p. 237.

⁷¹ Benjamin Fondane, *Cahiers juifs*, 2nd year, vol. II, 1934. Born Fundoianu, Fondane was a Jewish journalist of Romanian origin.

sacred intensity. Still, he recognized Baty's sincerity—a Christian mystic seeking Jewish mysticism—as a symbolic gesture of intercultural empathy: “Does he not, in fact, symbolize the attempt made in recent years—from both sides of the divide—to understand one another better, that is to say, to love one another more?”⁷². Jewish playwright Fernand Nozière—Fernand Aaron Weyl—took this critique further, observing that Baty seemed influenced by Christian art, and implying that the French director had, in a sense, “Christianized” the Hasidic drama by “de-Judaizing” it⁷³. Didn't Jewish actress Shoshanna Avivith—engaged by Baty for the role of Leah, which she had alternated with Hanna Rovina at Habimah—reportedly walk out of rehearsals, finding some of the director's instructions incompatible with the inner truth of Jewish ritual⁷⁴?

It is exactly by stripping the play of its *Yidishkeyt* that Baty weakened its expressive power. Habimah's intensity came from *within*; Baty's theatricality was imposed from *without*. This contrast reveals how intercultural dialogue is also a site of mutual resistance, where “performative translation” inevitably alters meaning and cultural significance by generating something *different*. A deeply Catholic director, Baty discarded Vakhtangov's ironic distortions and offered a spectacle shaped by Christian concern with redemption, spiritualizing the tale into a universal—but decontextualized—drama that strayed from its intrinsic truth.

Conversely, the following section explores a parallel yet inverse dynamic: how Jewish actors portrayed non-Jewish roles, revealing yet another layer of cultural negotiation between Jewish and French spheres.

Jewish portrayals of French characters

The Yiddish theatrical repertoire is rich in translations of Russian, German, English, Swedish, and French literature. Unlike Lovinescu's or Casanova's views of translation as a quest for legitimacy, these adaptations reflect a desire—encouraged by *maskilim*⁷⁵, literati, and Yiddish or Yiddishist cultural figures,

⁷² René Wisner, « Le Dibbouk », in *Menorah*, 7^e année, N° 4, 15.2, 1928, p. 54–55. [Emphasis added].

⁷³ Odette Aslan, *op. cit.*, p. 237–238.

⁷⁴ Shoshana Avivith, « Les origines d'Habima », in *Le Monde juif*, N° 9–10, 1947, p. 15.

⁷⁵ The *maskilim* (plural of *maskil*) are the proponents of the *Haskalah*, or Jewish Enlightenment, a movement that emerged in 18th-century Europe advocating for secular education, linguistic assimilation, and integration into wider European society, while promoting internal reform within Judaism. See also note 6.

to engage in dialogue with internationally recognized cultures, to educate audiences, and to discover echoes of their concerns in this foreign heritage. Molière, Victor Hugo, Alexandre Dumas, and Romain Rolland figured among the canonized French authors performed in Yiddish in interwar Paris.

Is it a coincidence that *Der karger* (“The Miser”) was a favorite among Jewish actors, or rather a propensity toward self-mockery on the part of a group long stereotyped for their supposed love of money? Consider what happens when French classics are performed in Yiddish. Another signature role for Charles Dullin, the character of the miserly bourgeois appears in his version as a soberly dressed gentleman of the *Grand Siècle*, clutching his cash box as a fetish object. Jewish actors, by contrast, often portrayed Harpagon with humbler clothing, a key ring at the waist, a hunched back, and an inquisitive, dazed look—drawing on commedia dell’arte traditions as well as on their own burlesque style. To underscore the old man’s obsession with money, some actors—like Joseph Buloff—did not hesitate to add a prosthetic “Jewish” nose in a gesture of biting self-mockery (Fig. 5).

Since very few records survive, we must rely on available photographs to reconstruct staging. These scarce materials suggest, however, that French characters were “Yiddishized” through gestures of parody and exaggeration, echoing the spirit of the *Purimshpil*⁷⁶—the comic dramatization of The Book of Esther—widely regarded as the precursor of Yiddish theatre. Rooted in festive transgression and inversion, it allowed Jewish communities to explore identity through laughter and masked performance. Far from concealing the self, the carnival mask revealed hidden dimensions, allowing for momentary freedom from social constraints.

That subversive tradition infused Yiddish theatre at large, whether in operettas, melodramas, or artistic plays, but also in the broader Jewish cultural sphere. As French historian Jean Baumgarten puts it:

“Parody, mockery, and laughter appear to play a cardinal role within Jewish communal life—fundamental modes of expression through which the inversion of taboos, the undermining of social hierarchies, and the temporary release from certain social constraints are manifested”⁷⁷.

⁷⁶ The *Purimshpil* (Yiddish for “Purim play”) is a traditional popular performance staged during the Jewish festival of Purim, featuring comic, satirical, or parodic retellings of the Book of Esther, and incorporating music, dance, and improvisation.

⁷⁷ Jean Baumgarten, « Le *Purimshpil* et la tradition carnavalesque », in *Pardès*, n°15, 1992, p. 37.

The Jewish *vis comica*, intimately tied to Purim and other folk traditions like commedia dell'arte, draws its strength from the cultural matrix of *Yidishkeyt* itself. Blending sacred and profane, parody and pathos, this spirit is also a means of self-defense—a release valve relieving the pressures of marginalization and oppression, turning laughter into resilience and resistance. Such comic energy is what Jewish actors drew upon when “Judaizing” French characters like Molière’s *Miser*, reframing them through irony, self-mockery, and historical memory. These Yiddish adaptations reflect Even-Zohar’s model, as they position canonical French texts within a peripheral system to serve new cultural, ideological, and identity-forming functions.

Judaizing was not only a performative gesture of disguise and revelation—it also carried social and political weight. *Les deux cents millions de Gladiator* (*Gladiator’s Two Hundred Million*) by the French dramatist Eugène Labiche, translated into Yiddish as *Der Milyoner, der tseyndokter un der oreman* (*The Millionaire, the Dentist and the Pauper*), and performed by the Moscow State Yiddish Theatre (“Goset”) in 1934, offers a persuasive example of how a classic French vaudeville was reimagined through a Jewish prism—infused with class critique, communal irony, and the socio-political tensions of the interwar Soviet context. Though never staged in Paris, it stands as an eloquent case study in ideological translation.

The production was directed by French communist writer and art critic Léon Moussinac, who documented his three-month stay with the troupe during its 1934 Russian tour in his travel journal *Avec les comédiens soviétiques en tournée*⁷⁸ (*With Touring Soviet Actors*). Published in 1935, this 64-page booklet allowed the French author to offer an insider’s view of Soviet stage life—its organization, working methods, and the distinctive nature of the relationship between actors and spectators, as well as the very conditions of dramatic creation and the osmosis between theatre and the new society. More specifically, it allowed him to reflect on the first six rehearsals of *Les deux cents millions* along with the collective’s thoughts, questions, and hesitations, most notably those of lead-actor Mikhoels, who, shaped by Granovsky’s methods, was deeply uneasy about venturing into a genre he considered—at least initially—incompatible with Goset’s repertoire⁷⁹.

⁷⁸ Moussinac’s (1890–1964) writings often reflected Marxist cultural theory and aligned with the party’s ideological commitments, see Léon Moussinac, *Avec les Comédiens soviétiques en tournée*, Paris, Éditions Sociales Internationales, 1936, p. 5–6.

⁷⁹ *Ibidem*.

This four-act play, a vaudeville comedy from 1875, follows Eusèbe Potasse (Benjamin Zuskin), assistant in the Bigouret pharmacy, in love with Suzanne de La Bondrée (Sarah Rotbaum), a fake countess and real courtesan chasing a wealthy American, Richard Gladiator, whose arrival in Paris is eagerly awaited. After a failed romance, Eusèbe attempts suicide but is rescued by the dentist Gredane (Solomon Mikhoels), who takes him home. There, his daughter Agnès (Eda Berkovskaia, Zuskin's wife), fiancée of Bigouret, falls for Eusèbe.

One might well ask how Labiche ended up at Goset. Moussinac himself posed the question from the outset: "What can this master entertainer of the petty-bourgeoisie possibly offer audiences familiar with *200.000*, *The Sorceress*, and *The Travels of Benjamin the Third*, who know the way to Malaia Bronnaia?"⁸⁰. Despite the significant resistance of the troupe, he remained convinced that the material could be adapted "to various compelling aspects of Soviet contemporary life". According to him, the amorous adventures of an American who comes to France to buy everything he couldn't find at home—including transactional love—held the potential to deliver social critique on two levels: a vertical one—money as the ruler of the world, and a horizontal one, embodied by the gallery of characters in the play, representative of the respectable middle-class mentality that, seventeen years after the October Revolution, still lingered in Soviet society.

This position required heavy reworking of the play: the character of Gladiator—"a representation of capitalism in its crudest forms"⁸¹—was brought to the fore at the expense of the demi-mondaine Suzanne, who had been the linchpin of the original Labiche plot. The dentist Gredane, a sort of double of Perrichon, hesitated until the last moment between his emotions and his interests—"selling" his daughter to the wealthy pharmacist Bigouret rather than to the penniless clerk Eusèbe, the man he had saved. The action was moved from 1874 to 1900—the year of the Paris World's Fair and the peak of France's colonial and financial capitalism. Three acts replaced the initial four, cutting culturally specific references and emphasizing character absurdity and petty-bourgeois corruption "to the point of provoking a clear reaction in the spectator"⁸². This meant not only cutting references that would be intelligible only to a French audience, but also reworking the dialogue and stage direction with the help of painters (Labas and Stepanov) and composer Pulver to craft

⁸⁰ The location of the Moscow State Yiddish Theatre.

⁸¹ Léon Moussinac, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

⁸² *Ibidem*.

a caricature of the *curve*, the symbol of the modern style of the time—a task radically different from what Granovsky had previously demanded from his former collaborators, and a considerable challenge for them, despite their initial expectation that this would be a “very easy”⁸³ production.

All in all, while Moussinac conceived the project as “an experiment in using a French vaudeville by a Frenchman for the entertainment and instruction of Soviet audiences in 1934–1935”⁸⁴, Mikhoels saw it as a necessary struggle—both for the actors and the audience—because it would determine the success or failure of the entire endeavor. From the actor’s perspective, this unexpected repertoire piece offered intriguing possibilities for performance. Vaudeville, he argued, demands truthful acting in false situations—or vice versa—which calls for new techniques⁸⁵: “one must find striking shortcuts in the flash of an intonation, a gesture, a posture, a movement,” without slipping into mannerism—an approach still unfamiliar to Soviet theatre. To perform Labiche, “one must play the tone,” because the text hardly stands on its own; unlike in comedy, in vaudeville, “it is the situation that determines the characters”. Despite his theoretical statements about how he approached the role, the actor ultimately admitted: “I haven’t yet found myself in Labiche, which is why I act more convincingly in some scenes than in others”.

From his side, Zuskin, who drew inspiration from Chaplin and Buster Keaton for his portrayal of Eusèbe, complained that the Yiddish version was “linguistically heavy,” leading to a “careful” revision of the script to lighten certain lines⁸⁶. The work of the set painter also provoked considerable resistance, particularly from stage manager Stepanov and the stagehands, who were used to working with sturdy, simple materials rather than the delicate, lightweight fabrics preferred by Labas. The result? A production that would not appear overtly French—only a few characteristic details were retained so that the Soviet spectator “would not suspect that the action takes place in Paris in 1900 or that the characters are French”⁸⁷—and was recast as a Soviet parable.

Whether Soviet audiences—Jewish or not—enjoyed the play remains unknown. Moussinac nonetheless praised the Goset collective, contrasting its relative unity with the rivalries of Dullin’s or Copeau’s troupes in France.

⁸³ *Ibidem*.

⁸⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁸⁵ *Idem*, p. 16.

⁸⁶ *Idem*, p. 22.

⁸⁷ *Ibidem*.

Ultimately, *Gladiator's* adaptation underscores the complexity of performative translation. Far from a straightforward cultural transfer, the process involved a layered negotiation between form and meaning, laughter and critique, entertainment and ideology, tradition and political utility. For Jewish actors like Mikhoëls and Zuskin, interpreting Labiche meant confronting a theatrical heritage rooted in bourgeois frivolity and reshaping it into a socially resonant, politically aware performance. Their challenge was not only to embody roles from a different cultural register, but to reinterpret them in light of Jewish theatrical aesthetics and Soviet ideology. The outcome was not a mere parody of French society, but a self-reflective act of theatrical performative translation, where irony, satire, and estrangement became tools for both critique and survival. In this way, *the play* reflected not Parisian life, but the contradictions Jewish artists faced in negotiating inherited performance traditions under new ideological demands. It is here that Even-Zohar's theory of cultural transfer within a polysystem finds confirmation: translations from a dominant culture—like Labiche's vaudeville—can be repositioned and refunctioned within peripheral systems not as mere substitutes, but as catalysts for ideological critique and creative innovation.

Concluding Thoughts: Performing Cultural Asymmetry on Stage and Beyond

The application of Even-Zohar's polysystem theory corroborates that theatrical exchange extends far beyond the realm of textual translation and operates within a multidimensional cultural system shaped by uneven flows of cultural authority, where elements such as staging, performance, interpretation, and reception are as crucial as the written text. Within this expanded framework, Yiddish theatre in interwar Paris emerges not as a passive periphery on the margins of dominant culture but as an active and dynamic force within a broader transnational theatrical polysystem.

Of the three theoretical approaches considered—Lovinescu, Casanova, and Even-Zohar—the latter most effectively captures the complexities of the theatrical exchanges discussed above. While Lovinescu's synchronization model helps to explain temporal disjunctions in cultural development, and Casanova's *World Republic of Letters* foregrounds the power dynamics between dominant and minor literatures, both remain predominantly text-centered and therefore limited in their capacity to address the fluid, performative, and context-sensitive

nature of theatre. Even-Zohar, by contrast, offers a more adaptable and integrative framework—one that accommodates textual, performative, and systemic dimensions, allowing for bidirectional flows of influence between center and periphery. Crucially, this performative dimension is where cultural asymmetry becomes legible—not only through symbolic hierarchies, but through the embodied and negotiated space of theatrical practice.

The conceptual flexibility of Even-Zohar's model has left a lasting imprint on subsequent theories of world literature. Franco Moretti (b. 1950)⁸⁸, for instance, draws on key polysystemic concepts such as center-periphery dynamics and system asymmetry—to rethink how literature circulates and gains prominence on a global scale. In his “Conjectures on World Literature,” he proposes a model of world literature that is “simultaneously one and unequal,”⁸⁹ a triangulated “system of *variations*”⁹⁰ rooted in comparative morphology and global diffusion, where foreign form (plot), local material (characters), and local form (narrative voice)—a key but unstable variable—“interfere” with one other⁹¹. Similarly, Pascale Casanova, though less directly, echoes the Israeli theorist's framework in her discussion about translation as “literarization,” wherein translation mediates the unequal struggle for symbolic legitimacy between source and target languages.

While both theorists foreground asymmetry in the literary sphere, their models remain largely text-focused. In contrast, the case of Yiddish theatre in Paris underscores how asymmetries are not only written but also enacted—performed, resisted, and reconfigured through the embodied practice. This shift in focus from text to performance reminds us that cultural negotiation unfolds as much in physical, intercultural encounters as in written discourse.

From this perspective, the traditional model of cultural dominance, structured around a fixed center and a subordinate periphery, appears more contingent and context-dependent than previously assumed. At times, French theatre asserted authority, as in the interpretative control exercised by figures like Gémier and Baty. At others, Yiddish theatre asserted its creative agency, reimagining and recontextualizing canonical French texts such as those of Molière or Labiche

⁸⁸ Franco Moretti (b. 1950) is an Italian literary scholar best known for his work on world literature, literary geography, and quantitative approaches to literary history. His concept of “distant reading” challenges traditional close reading by focusing on large-scale literary patterns across time and space, see Franco Moretti, “Conjectures on World Literature,” in *New Left Review*, 2000, p. 55–67.

⁸⁹ *Idem*, p. 56.

⁹⁰ *Idem*, p. 64.

⁹¹ *Idem*, p. 65.

for new—Yiddish-speaking—audiences, by using distinct performative codes and cultural framing.

Ultimately, theatrical representation makes asymmetry tangible—not merely through words, but through directorial choices, embodied expression, audience response, and critical discourse. The encounters between Yiddish and French theatre in interwar Paris exemplify this dynamic: rather than a one-way transfer of influence from dominant to minor culture, they reveal a complex and reciprocal process of symbolic exchange—a mutual, if asymmetrical, act of theatrical translation.



Fig. 1: *Charles Dullin in the role of the pimp Yankl Tshaptshovitch (Photo Henri Manuel, P.B., Le Temps, [s.d.], 1925)*



Fig. 2: *Firmin Gémier in the role of Shylock, Théâtre Antoine (1919), Comoedia Illustré, 5.11.1919*

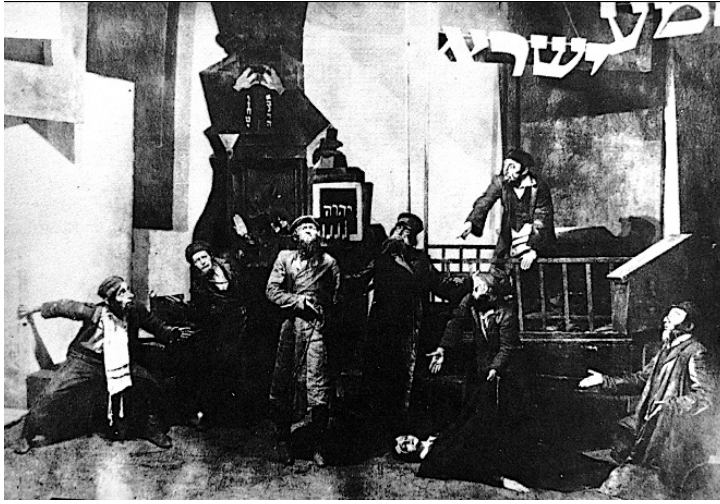


Fig. 3: *Khonen's death, Habimah* (O. Aslan, « *Les voies de la création théâtrale* »)



Fig. 4: *Khonen's death, G. Baty* (*Optima*, 8.3.1928, Photo Henri Manuel)

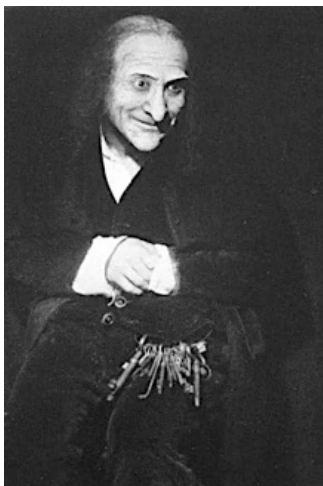


Fig. 5: *Joseph Buloff in the role of Harpagon* (*The Israel Goor Theatre Archives, Jerusalem*)

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VOICELESS RESISTANCE: GENDER, COLONIALISM, AND THE LIMITS OF AGENCY IN XU XI'S *HONG KONG ROSE*

Shiqian Zhou*

Abstract: This paper argues that although Xu Xi advocates for a unique Hong Kong identity that resists assimilation into both Chinese nationalism and Western colonial narratives, her portrayal of Rose, the protagonist in *Hong Kong Rose*, ultimately fails to fully reject Orientalist representations. While the novel acknowledges Rose's dual oppression under Western and Confucian patriarchal structures, it does not grant her sufficient narrative agency to transcend them. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of Edward Said's *Orientalism*, Gayatri Spivak's concept of the subaltern, and Chandra Talpade Mohanty's critique of Western feminism, this study demonstrates that Rose's struggle for autonomy remains constrained by cultural expectations and colonial discourse. Her attempts to assert independence, such as engaging in extramarital intimacy or choosing emigration, are presented as emotionally conflicted and morally compromised rather than as acts of empowerment. Ultimately, the novel aestheticizes Rose's endurance and positions it as a form of quiet virtue, rather than constructing a fully emancipated subjectivity. Despite its intention to critique patriarchal and colonial oppression from an insider's perspective, *Hong Kong Rose* risks reproducing the very Orientalist tropes it seeks to dismantle.

Keywords: gender, colonialism, Chinese nationalism, Western colonial narratives, Hong Kong Rose.

In *Hong Kong Rose*, the female protagonist Rose Kho is presented as a kind of floating existence. Xu Xi introduces a network of relationships that shape Rose Kho's emotional and social confinement under colonial and patriarchal forces. Rose, a Hong Kong-born Chinese woman, marries Paul Kho, a wealthy South African Chinese solicitor who enjoys social prestige but conceals his homosexuality. Within this marriage, Rose is forced to maintain a façade of

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respectability and remain in a sexless relationship to preserve the family's image. Her in-laws, Paul Sr. and Marion, embody the authority of Confucian patriarchy as they dictate how Rose should behave. Paul Sr.'s intrusive gaze and physical advances shows that Rose experiences the gendered violence hidden beneath the surface of moral discipline. When Rose later meets Elliot, Paul's lover, she experiences a temporary emotional warmth and physical intimacy that contrasts with her empty marriage. However, Elliot cannot offer long-term commitment because he already has a wife and daughter to care for. Since Rose cannot find happiness in Hong Kong and feels constrained by colonial hierarchies, gendered expectations of obedience, and emotional repression, she longs to leave and begin a new chapter of her life in the United States by working for her employer, Gordie. She eventually Xu Xi shows that Rose Kho fails to stay in the United States and faces deportation because Gordie, the man she works for, is caught running illegal arms. This failure is more than a legal issue; it underscores Rose's inability to fully belong to either the West or the East. It reveals that she must return to Hong Kong, where she endures an unfulfilling marriage with her gay husband—the very situation she once sought to escape.

Throughout the story, Rose never develops a genuine sense of belonging to any place, remaining caught between two worlds that both reject her in different ways. She does not feel American, but she also feels out of place in Hong Kong: "Gordie laughs when I say I never intended to live in America, that I didn't want to leave Hong Kong—he thinks I've always been American at heart"¹. While her boss misreads her as someone who always has an American heart, Rose quietly disagrees with him by implying that she does not remain in the United States after graduation but instead returns to Hong Kong to marry her boyfriend, Paul. However, after discovering her husband's affair and being unable to divorce him due to Marion's insistence on maintaining social decency, Rose views working in the United States as a legitimate reason to escape her suffocating marriage. In this context, her relocation to the United States is not a matter of personal choice but a decision forced by circumstance. After realizing that leaving Hong Kong could relieve the pain caused by the pressure from her parents and in-laws to remain in the marriage, Rose begins to engage in an internal psychological dialogue: "Maybe that's why I work for him"². By saying this line, Rose reveals that she is not aligned with American

¹ Xu Xi, *Hong Kong Rose*, Hong Kong, Chameleon Press, 2005, p. 1.

² *Ibid.*

culture. She leaves the United States not out of cultural rejection but because of the marital problems she experiences. Here lies the central conflict: Rose's movements between Hong Kong and the United States are not expressions of freedom or belonging, but consequences of circumstances beyond her control. Therefore, Rose sees herself as a person caught in between: she is rejected by the system in the United States, yet Hong Kong no longer feels like a secure home for her. She does not fully belong in either place.

This essay argues that although *Hong Kong Rose* attempts to depict the complex realities of a Hong Kong woman under colonial rule, Xu Xi ultimately fails to provide Rose with sufficient narrative agency to challenge the Orientalist stereotype of the passive, obedient Asian woman. Rose endures multiple layers of oppression: she is trapped in a loveless marriage to a closeted gay husband, controlled by her father-in-law who dictates her reproductive choices, and shaped by her own internalization of Confucian ideals that demand emotional restraint and submission. While she seeks intimacy through an extramarital affair and contemplates leaving Hong Kong for the United States, these gestures of resistance are consistently undermined by hesitation, guilt, and a need to frame her actions within socially acceptable norms. As a result, Rose remains a character whose suffering is aestheticized rather than subverted, reinforcing rather than dismantling the Orientalist framework she appears to resist.

Living the Contradiction: Rose and the Paradox of Hong Kong Identity

The complexity of Hong Kong identity lies not in fixed national allegiance but in its fractured, hybrid nature, which is formed through historical contradiction, cultural ambivalence, and negotiated survival. As Mathews argues, Hongkongers began to define themselves in the late 20th century not through inherited traditions but within “a tiny fissure”³ between British and Chinese hegemonies, carving out a new identity “as not British, not Chinese, but Hongkongese”⁴. This fissure allowed for the emergence of a distinct cultural subjectivity shaped by multiple, often conflicting influences. Mathews explains that *Hèunggóngyàhn* is best understood as “Chineseness plus”⁵: for some, this

³ Gordon Mathews, “Hèunggóngyàhn: On the Past, Present, and Future of Hong Kong Identity”, *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, 29(3), 1997, p. 10.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Idem*, p. 9.

means Chineseness plus “affluence, cosmopolitanism, capitalism”⁶; for others, it is Chineseness plus “English, colonial education, colonialism” or “democracy, human rights, the rule of law”⁷. These formulations are not merely descriptive: They are emotionally charged responses to colonial education and postcolonial anxiety. For instance, one interviewee claims, “all the bad traits in my personality are from my Chinese side,” while another laments the loss of “our original culture” due to colonial schooling, saying, “we have no home”⁸. This ambivalence toward both Chinese nationalism and Western influence defines the emotional terrain of Hong Kong identity. Even fundamental historical facts such as the Opium War are taught differently in English- and Chinese-language textbooks, leading Mathews to describe the result as a kind of “schizophrenia of recent Hong Kong identity”⁹. Thus, Hong Kong identity is not merely a cultural label but a lived contradiction—a constant negotiation between inherited tradition, colonial modernity, and global pressures. This unstable foundation is precisely what gives the identity its specificity and emotional intensity. Rather than being a national essence, *Hèunggóngyàhn* is a strategy of survival—one that, as will be argued, is deeply reflected in the character of Rose in *Hong Kong Rose*.

Building on Mathews’s conception of *Hèunggóngyàhn* as an identity forged in contradiction, Rose’s fragmented subjectivity in *Hong Kong Rose* can be read as a personal embodiment of this cultural fissure—her emotional ambivalence and constrained agency mirroring the broader struggle of Hongkongers to define themselves between Chinese tradition and Western modernity. Her final return to the place that represses her may initially position Rose as a flawed character who fails to reclaim feminist autonomy. However, this perceived failure is exactly what allows her to claim a uniquely Hong Kong identity: One shaped by contradiction, cultural fragmentation, and survival between incompatible systems of power. Trapped in a sexless marriage with Paul, a closeted gay man, and forced by her in-laws to uphold the illusion of marital harmony, Rose reflects the tension between Confucian ideals of female obedience and the emotional repression demanded by colonial respectability. Her reluctant return to the United States, a country that once promised freedom but instead became another site of marginalization, mirrors the way Hong Kong itself is caught between two hegemonic forces: British colonialism and Chinese nationalism.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Idem*, p. 7.

As Gordon Mathews argues, the people of Hong Kong developed a local identity in the fissure between Chinese and British ideologies of legitimacy, where they were “not offered an alternative sense of identity by either side”¹⁰. Like Hongkongers who grew up confused by conflicting narratives in British and Chinese textbooks, for example, seeing the Opium War described both as a “trade dispute” and an act of national humiliation, Rose is shaped by contradictory ideologies: Western feminism urges her to assert autonomy, while Chinese tradition demands loyalty and silence. Mathews highlights that Hong Kong identity is defined by this uncertainty and complexity: “Who we are in Hong Kong is still very much in question. But it’s our question”¹¹. Rose does not resolve these tensions—she lives them. Her return is not passive surrender, but a conscious engagement with emotional and historical entanglements that cannot be cleanly resolved. Like the Hongkongers Mathews describes who were unsure what to write under “nationality,” British, Chinese, or simply “Hong Kong,” Rose navigates her identity through negotiation rather than clarity. Her silence, indecision, and emotional endurance are not signs of weakness; they are evidence of her internalization of a postcolonial condition where no single narrative of liberation fits. In embracing this ambiguity, Rose claims a distinctly Hèunggóngyàhn identity: not British, not Chinese, not American, but formed in the margins of all three.

This kind of identity caught between cultures is something Rose lives with every day. Her way of speaking, the name she uses, and how others see her all reflect the complex space she occupies as someone shaped by both Chinese traditions and Western influences. The signs of Rose’s Westernization seem to be obvious in Westerners’ eyes because she speaks English and adopts a Westernized name, “Rose,” in Hong Kong. However, “the practice of anglicizing Chinese names”¹², which refers to the act of modifying the sounds of Chinese names or choosing entirely new English ones, was a common and practical convention in colonial Hong Kong’s work communication. While Rose’s cultural identity may be mistaken as evidence of Rose’s embrace of a Western identity, this reading is partially understandable, as Hong Kong used to be a British colony. Shaped by its colonial legacy, Hong Kong’s local society is still built upon Chinese culture but has had Western values, systems, and institutions imposed on it:

¹⁰ Mathews G., *op. cit.*, p. 7.

¹¹ *Idem*, p. 12.

¹² Michael H. Bond, Ambrose Y.C. King, “Coping with the threat of westernization in Hong Kong”, *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, Vol. IX, no. 4, 1985, p. 355.

As a colony, it routinely confronted, and continues to confront, the local Chinese with the whole panoply of an alien reality. The economic component of this reality is described as *laissez-faire* capitalism and is supported by an attendant legal system based on British common law. There are, however, more insidious tentacles to this octopus.¹³

Living in this hybrid colonial space, Rose, as many Hongkongers, must learn to speak and move fluently within both cultural systems. Her use of English and adoption of an anglicized name are not signs of internalized Western superiority but strategies for professional survival in a colonial society shaped by British values. This strategic adaptation mirrors what Mathews describes as Hongkongers' pragmatic negotiation with conflicting identities: neither fully embracing Britishness nor reverting to a pure Chinese nationalism. Rose may appear to have assimilated, but she simultaneously claims her local identity when she corrects her boss by calling herself a "Hong Kong yan"¹⁴ when Colin Kenton, her boss, asks whether she can speak Cantonese. subtly asserting that she is neither simply Chinese nor merely Westernized. This assertion complicates the Western misreading of her identity and aligns with Xu Xi's critique of Orientalist depictions of Hong Kong in literature:

My earliest encounter with Hong Kong writing was almost entirely fiction by Western residents and visitors for whom English was their native tongue... Their perspective was frequently that of an outside observer—often romanticized or Orientalized—with little, if any, of what could be described as a local aesthetic or sensibility.¹⁵

Xu Xi implies that Western residents and visitors has a transient, detached relationship to Hong Kong, yet the dominance of non-local voices shapes the literary image of Hong Kong. The problem is that these outsiders do not write from within the lived experience of Hong Kong people. Instead, they offer narratives that are romanticized or Orientalized, which are filtered through exotic fantasies or simplistic cultural assumptions. Xu argues that such representations

¹³ *Idem*, p. 355.

¹⁴ Xu Xi, *op. cit.*, p. 107.

¹⁵ Xu Xi, Ho Louise, "From and of the City of Hong Kong", in *City Voices: Hong Kong Writing in English 1945 to the Present*, Xu Xi and Mike Ingham (eds.), Hong Kong, Hong Kong University Press, 2003, p. 19.

reduce local characters like Rose into exotic figures rather than multidimensional subjects. Through this lens, Rose's identity should not be interpreted through binaries of East and West. Rather, her fluid subjectivity reflects Mathews's claim that Hèunggóngyàhn identity is "forged not out of allegiance to one side or another, but out of the contradictions themselves". Rose lives with these contradictions, but the problematic representation of this female protagonist she does not resolve them while emotionally suffering from it. Her emotional sufferings from both the West and the Chinese Confucian rules suggests that she has limited agency to live a life that she wants in either system.

Theoretical Framework: Orientalism and Orientalized Female

Edward W. Said's concept of *Orientalism* exposes the deeply political nature of representation in colonial and post-colonial discourse. In his seminal work *Orientalism*, Said critiques how the West has historically constructed the East, or "Orient," not as a cultural equal, but as a distorted mirror through which the West defines itself. He argues that "the Oriental was linked thus to elements in Western society (delinquents, the insane, women, the poor)... seen through, analyzed not as citizens, or even people, but as problems to be solved or confined"¹⁶. This framing reduces the Oriental to an object of control and fantasy, stripping them of agency and voice. In literature, this manifests through characters and settings that serve to reinforce the West's self-image as rational, civilized, and superior. Such narratives depict non-Western subjects not as complex individuals, but as "repositories of all those characteristics deemed non-Western"¹⁷, thereby creating and reinforcing a binary between the self and the "Other." Said further emphasizes that this process is not limited to overt domination, but survives through subtle cultural practices, including literary texts, which help justify imperialism by aestheticizing domination. The act of reading, then, becomes inherently political. Said proposes a method of *contrapuntal reading*, which involves reading texts "with a simultaneous awareness both of the metropolitan history that is narrated and of those other histories against which... the dominating discourse acts"¹⁸. Literature, in this view, becomes a battleground of competing narratives, those that uphold

¹⁶ Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, New York, Vintage Books, 1994, p. 207.

¹⁷ *Idem*, p. 59.

¹⁸ *Idem*, p. 100.

imperial power and those that resist it through reclaiming silenced voices and distorted identities. Representation is therefore never neutral; it is a form of discursive power that shapes how the East is seen, governed, and remembered, both in colonial archives and in modern cultural productions.

Therefore, the representation of women in colonial time Hong Kong still reinforces Orientalized stereotype because it only describes the oppression imposed on the women while providing limited agency for her to choose her life. She does not lack intelligence or moral strength, but she internalizes the oppressive ideologies that confine her. Edward Said's concept of Orientalism offers a critical framework for understanding Rose Kho's identity and inner conflict in Xu Xi's *Hong Kong Rose*. In *Orientalism*, Said argues that Western representations of the East were not objective or neutral, but deeply political and ideological. They served to construct the Orient as Europe's cultural opposite-irrational, emotional, and inferior-so that the West could define itself as rational, moral, and civilized. Said observes that "the Oriental was linked thus to elements in Western society (delinquents, the insane, women, the poor) having in common an identity best described as lamentably alien. Orientals were rarely seen or looked at: "they were seen through, analysed not as citizens, or even people, but as problems to be solved or confined"¹⁹. This statement reveals how the "Oriental" subject was denied full humanity, reduced to a passive object of Western discourse rather than an autonomous being. Rose embodies the effects of this system of representation. Although she lives within a British colony that celebrates Western modernity, she remains confined by both the colonial gaze and Confucian patriarchy. Like the Orientals in Said's analysis, Rose is "seen through" by others rather than seen as herself. To her Western employers such as Gordie and Colin, she represents the assimilated, efficient Hong Kong woman who has absorbed Western manners but not their full respect. Gordie laughs when Rose says she does not want to live in America, assuming that her presence there is motivated by a secret desire to become Westernized. This misreading illustrates what Said calls the "discursive power" of imperialism, which "administers, studies, and reconstructs"²⁰ non-European subjects into legible forms of the Western imagination. Rose becomes the colonial "Other" who must be explained and categorized, not understood as an individual with complex motives.

¹⁹ Edward W. Said, *op. cit.*

²⁰ *Idem*, p. 222.

Her flaw lies in her complicity with the very structures that silence her voice. Instead of openly confronting her husband Paul's homosexuality or her father-in-law's sexual harassment, Rose remains submissive, convincing herself that obedience and respectability are virtues. Rose interprets male authority as fate rather than oppression: I felt like a hundred ancient imperials were commanding me to heed their words, to meet my destiny²¹. This moment reveals her psychological surrender to patriarchal power. Her inability to resist or even name her own victimization exposes what Edward Said describes in *Orientalism* as the colonial subject's "lamentably alien" position—being seen "not as citizens, or even people, but as problems to be solved or confined"²². Like the Oriental figures in Said's critique, Rose becomes an object defined by others' desires: the dutiful daughter-in-law, the respectable wife, and later, the guilty adulteress. Although she seeks brief liberation through her affair with Elliot, her dependence on male validation persists, since Elliot, too, cannot love her freely because of his wife and daughter. Rose's flaw is therefore not merely personal weakness but a form of learned submission, shaped by both Confucian patriarchy and colonial discourse. Xu Xi deliberately crafts this imperfection to reveal how the colonized woman internalizes the voices that dominate her, illustrating Said's claim that imperial power operates not only through territorial control but through the "discursive power that administers, studies, and reconstructs" the colonized self²³. Through Rose's moral hesitation and emotional passivity, Xu Xi critiques the psychological legacy of colonial and patriarchal domination that renders women unable to imagine true autonomy. However, she still fails to make Rose a representation that breaks the Orientalist script.

Reinforcing the Orientalist Gaze: The Limits of Rose's Agency

Schirato expands on Edward Said's concept of Orientalism by emphasizing that it is not merely a set of prejudiced ideas or cultural attitudes, but a "corporate institution" that systematically legitimizes Western power and authority²⁴. He explains that this institution operates through a network of

²¹ Xu Xi, *op. cit.*, p.109.

²² Edward W. Said, *op. cit.*, p. 207.

²³ Edward W. Said, *op. cit.*

²⁴ Tony Schirato, "The Narrative of Orientalism", *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science*, vol. XXII, 1994, p. 43.

“academics, scientists, journalists, novelists, bureaucrats... produce the texts and the knowledge that explains the Orient/Oriental”²⁵. In other words, Orientalism functions as a discourse of control, in which knowledge about the East is not produced neutrally but constructed to maintain Western dominance. Through such discursive practices, the West defines itself as rational, civilized, and authoritative, while positioning the East as irrational, emotional, and subordinate. Schirato further notes that this process grants the West an “informed, authoritative” voice that enables it to justify “violent non-discursive practices”²⁶. These practices extend beyond physical domination to include the shaping of cultural and intellectual hierarchies that privilege Western perspectives as objective and universal. Consequently, Orientalism becomes a self-reinforcing system in which representations of the East—produced and circulated by Western institutions—are accepted as truth. Even cultural expressions that appear neutral or apolitical participate in this structure, since, as Schirato observes, “it is impossible to maintain any essential distinction between supposedly apolitical culture and colonial domination”²⁷. This framework reveals how power operates not only through political control but through language, representation, and interpretation, ensuring that the West continues to speak *for* and *about* the East while silencing the voices that originate from within it.

Xu Xi's *Hong Kong Rose* reveals how the author's portrayal of women, despite its feminist intention, still reinforces Orientalized stereotypes that depict Chinese women as victims of both patriarchy and colonial oppression with limited agency to define their own lives. Rose's story appears to critique traditional gender hierarchies, yet the narrative repeatedly confines her within familiar images of obedience, sacrifice, and emotional restraint. Rose faces dual subjugation—by British colonial structures that question her cultural belonging and by Confucian codes that dictate her moral duty. She is constantly asked where she is from and whether she considers herself Chinese because her English is too fluent and native, a question that places her identity under the colonial gaze. Her struggle to respond illustrates the typical Orientalist dilemma: the Chinese woman who must translate herself to be understood by the West but can never truly belong to it.

At the same time, her life is governed by the *Three Obediences and Four Virtues* (*San Cong Si De*), which institutionalize female submission:

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Idem*, p. 45.

During the Han Dynasty (206 B.C.E.–219 C.E), typical feminine virtues namely obedience and loyalty were developed into something like “feminine ethics,” as Lin puts it. The most famous, or infamous, of these codes are the Three Obediences and Four Virtues (*San Cong Si De*). The Three Obediences require women to obey the father before the marriage, obey the husband after marriage, and obey the first son after the death of husband. The Four Virtues are (sexual) morality, proper speech, modest manner, and diligent work. Pan Zhao, daughter of a famous literati and a loyal disciple of Confucius, was a great exponent of the Three Obediences and Four Virtues. In her book entitled *Precepts for Women* (*Nuijie*), she exalted the submission and self-effacement of women before the authority of father and husband.²⁸

Xu Xi uses this historical framework to show how Rose’s femininity is shaped by inherited ideals of moral womanhood, yet the representation remains bound to the same patriarchal and Orientalist logic it seeks to expose. Rose embodies the submissive woman who preserves harmony at the cost of selfhood in the patriarchal system. Confined within this system, a woman must obey her father before marriage, her husband after marriage, and her son if widowed. She is also expected to uphold sexual morality, speak modestly, behave humbly, and engage in diligent domestic labor. Even when she discovers her husband Paul’s homosexuality, she remains in a loveless marriage, believing that her worth as a woman depends on maintaining the appearance of respectability. Her self-sacrifice is portrayed as quiet strength. This portrayal echoes the Orientalized trope of the noble yet powerless Asian woman whose virtue lies in endurance rather than resistance. These ideals glorify submission and self-effacement as feminine virtues.

Rose’s relationship with her father-in-law, Paul Sr., further reinforces this image. One of the three Obediences requires women to obey her father as a maiden²⁹, but Rose’s experience shows that Chinese women needs to submit to father-like figure, such as their father-in-law, even after marriage. Paul Sr.’s authority represents both Confucian patriarchy and colonial paternalism: an older male figure who dictates moral order and domestic control. Although Rose and her husband Paul start a life together, it is Paul Sr., her father-in-law,

²⁸ Xiongya Gao, “Women Existing for Men: Confucianism and Social Injustice against Women in China”, *Race, Gender & Class*, vol. X, no. 3, 2003, p. 116.

²⁹ Chenjie Zeng, “The Story of Ti Ying: The Conflicts between Traditional Ethics and Its Development in Chinese Culture”, *Academia Letters*, 2021, p. 2.

who exercises control over their domestic arrangements. For example, Paul Sr. lectures Rose about how their new home should be arranged³⁰, including what kind of room they should live in. Rose personally feels more used to a more chaotic environment at home because she is raised in such a household. Without seeking Rose's opinion, Paul demands Rose to live in a quiet and organized space after marriage. Paul's power to shape Rose's behavior and thoughts makes him a symbol of the force of Confucian patriarchy. Rose accepts his interference in her life without protest. She positions herself as inferior to men and defines her identity in relation to gendered expectations, saying he made her feel "feminine, ladylike, without taking away any of [her] accomplishments as an educated" woman³¹. This moment encapsulates the tension between her education and her internalized subservience: Even as a modern woman, she finds validation in male approval. Her description of Paul Sr.'s gaze underscores her psychological submission:

He looked hard at me. It was disconcerting. Paul Sr. had the kind of eyes that reflected the annals of history. I felt like a hundred ancient imperials were commanding me to heed their words, to meet my destiny.³²

Here, Rose equates male power with destiny itself, transforming oppression into inevitability. Xu Xi's language aestheticizes this submission, making it seem fated and even poetic. This portrayal—of a woman ruled by history and male authority—reproduces the Orientalist image that Edward Said (1978) critiques: the Eastern woman as "lamentably alien," viewed not as an individual but as a cultural symbol of passivity. Through such depictions, Rose's suffering becomes emblematic rather than transformative. Although Xu Xi intends to critique the patriarchal system, her narrative ultimately positions Rose within the same moral and emotional confinement that defines Orientalized femininity. Rose endures rather than resists, adapts rather than transforms. Her silence, restraint, and tragic obedience reaffirm the colonial fantasy of the submissive Asian woman—demonstrating that Xu Xi's novel, while self-aware, never fully escapes the Orientalist framework it seeks to dismantle.

³⁰ Xu Xi, *op. cit.*, p.108.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Idem*, p. 109.

*Between Voice and Silence: The Representation
of the Subaltern Woman in Xu Xi's Hong Kong Rose*

Xu Xi offers an insider's perspective in her novel *Hong Kong Rose*, portraying the personal desires of Hong Kong women for love and the profound constraints imposed on them by patriarchal oppression. In response to the adoption of Western practices in Hong Kong, that even if Hong Kong locals adopt Western practices such as speaking English or using English names, Hong Kong people do not abandon their Chinese roots. The misreading of Asian characters in literature aligns with what Xu Xi points out: earlier representations of Hong Kong often lacked a "local aesthetic or sensibility"³³ because most of the Westerners were not part of Hong Kong life. This absence is significant because it shows that stories like Rose's cannot be fully understood through a Western framework. Emphasizing this absence, Xu Xi encourages readers to question the authority of those who speak about Hong Kong without being of it. In this light, Rose should be read not as a symbol of cultural betrayal or mimicry of colonizers. In her view, adopting Western norms is a form of local adaptation under colonial rule rather than cultural betrayal. In "From and of the City of Hong Kong," Xu Xi confirms that her ethnicity and cultural identity are Chinese, but she asks the rhetorical question: "But by writing in English, wasn't I also part of this 'mongrel' margin?"³⁴ This rhetorical question implies that Hong Kong writers are at the "mongrel margin" since they do not have a clear identity, as it is neither fully aligned with China nor the West. "Mongrel" also signals that this identity is not pure or Western but fractured by necessity and colonial circumstance. To refute the argument that Hong Kong people abandon their Chinese cultural roots, Xu Xi explains that growing up, she spoke in "Cantolish, Eng-ese, and English"³⁵. Similarly, her parents, who are Southeast Asian immigrants, spoke Javanese and Mandarin and acquired English "purely for survival in their borrowed land"³⁶. These examples suggest that speaking English is practical for communication and social mobility in colonial Hong Kong. Thus, adopting Western practices like speaking English does not reflect voluntary assimilation but rather the constraints of the political and educational system under colonial rule.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Idem*, p. 19.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

However, the irony lies in the fact that Xu Xi ultimately fails to offer an empowering representation of Hong Kong women, as Rose remains unable to challenge her subaltern status. In her family, she is mostly experiencing gender constraints within a traditional family and gradually begins to satisfy her own desire for love and freedom. The evidence above shows that Rose remains in a subaltern position despite marrying a wealthy Chinese–South African solicitor. Her status is both marginalized and desperate because the Confucian society does not protect women from the structural forces of gender oppression even when they have a good social position. Rose's position in Hong Kong Rose exemplifies what Gayatri Spivak calls the “double effacement”³⁷ of the subaltern woman, who is not only silenced by colonial discourse but also further marginalized by the patriarchal structures of gender. As Spivak argues, “the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant”³⁸, and in such systems, “the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow”³⁹. Rose's life is outwardly secure through marriage to a wealthy Chinese–South African solicitor, but she undergoes emotional silencing and has constrained agency. She is silent when confronted by Paul's lover, and later she does not dispute with Paul when he hopes that she bears a child with another man to maintain the illusion of a traditional family⁴⁰, reflect how her subjectivity is constructed through others' desires. Spivak's point that “there is no unrepresentable subaltern subject that can know and speak itself”⁴¹, which is manifested in Rose's speech and agency that are continuously mediated and contained by patriarchal expectations. She does not voice opposition, but learn to internalize these humiliations, suggesting that she remains trapped in a structure that denies her the capacity for autonomous articulation. Thus, while she exists within a modern, urban, colonial space, Rose's gendered subalternity calls into question whether she can ever truly “speak” in the Spivakian sense—on her own terms, as a fully self-determined subject.

Although Rose comes from a middle-class background and is literate, educated, and fluent in English, her emotional and political silence within the patriarchal system aligns with Spivak's concept of the subaltern: not as a literal absence

³⁷ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, 2nd ed., Bill Ashcroft et al. (eds.), London, Routledge, 2006., p. 32.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Xu Xi, *op. cit.*, p. 289.

⁴¹ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

of speech, but as a structural impossibility of being heard. Spivak famously asserts that “the subaltern cannot speak,”⁴² meaning that the subaltern’s voice is always mediated and reinterpreted through dominant discourses that determine what counts as knowledge, truth, or value. For Spivak, even when the subaltern “utters,” the act of speech itself is absorbed and re-coded by the listener, who belongs to the dominant structure of interpretation: “the utterance itself... would have to be interpreted in the way in which we historically interpret anything”⁴³. This observation reveals how the subaltern is not silenced by lack of speech, but by the absence of a listening framework that can recognize their speech as meaningful. In the context of Hong Kong, this structural condition parallels the city’s postcolonial predicament. As a place caught “between coloniality and postcoloniality,” Hong Kong’s voice, like that of the subaltern, is doubly displaced: its colonial history has been written by Britain, while its cultural future is claimed by China. The epistemic violence Spivak identifies, the process by which dominant powers erase or overwrite indigenous forms of knowing, applies equally to Hong Kong’s hybrid cultural identity, where local narratives are often subordinated to Western or nationalist frameworks. Within this dynamic, Rose becomes emblematic of the Hong Kong subject who speaks but is not heard. Her decisions to conform, to leave, or to love are interpreted through patriarchal or colonial codes that render her intelligible only as victim or transgressor. Spivak warns that when representation has not withered away, even attempts to “speak for” the oppressed risk re-inscribing them within existing hierarchies of knowledge⁴⁴. Similarly, Hong Kong’s women writers struggle to articulate autonomy within discourses that continually translate their experience into familiar binaries of East and West, submission and rebellion. Thus, Rose’s muted agency reflects not only her gendered position but also Hong Kong’s subaltern condition: a site of simultaneous visibility and erasure, where speech exists, but its meaning is perpetually misappropriated.

Her marriage to Paul exemplifies her subaltern status as she must endure Paul’s emotional distance and a sexless relationship. Marion, Paul’s mother, becomes devastated and cries out loud when telling Rose that Paul is homosexual⁴⁵. Even though she always knows Paul’s sexual orientation, she still aims to fulfill the rigid expectations of the Confucian patriarchal family system. Marion insists

⁴² *Idem*, p. 104.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *op. cit.*

⁴⁵ *Idem*, p. 116.

that Rose should remain in the marriage and have children regardless⁴⁶. This denial reflects not a lack of awareness but an unwillingness to accept a reality that threatens the family's public image and internal structure:

Same-sex marriage threatens the patriarchal family ideal because it de-naturalizes the place of gender differences and roles, so its legalization has the potential to transform marriage in ways that also benefit heterosexual women. Historically, the patriarchal family in China and the other East Asian societies influenced by Confucianism have been the target of many critiques.⁴⁷

As Tan explains, same-sex marriage “threatens the patriarchal family ideal because it de-naturalizes the place of gender differences and roles”⁴⁸. In this framework, homosexuality threatens the ideological foundations of the family itself, which makes Marion's mental breakdown more understandable. Her breakdown represents the collapse of a worldview in which the traditional family must consist of men and women. She cannot reconcile Paul's identity with the expectations placed on him as a Chinese son: to marry a woman, father children, and uphold the family name. This ideology also explains why Marion clings to the fantasy of a “perfectly normal life”⁴⁹ through Rose's cooperation even after knowing her son is homosexual. She attempts to convince Rose and Paul to maintain a conventional marriage to make sure they still hold the Confucian values. Marion's attitude reveals that same-sex desire challenges the rigidly structured, heteronormative system promoted by Confucianism, which is unacceptable for Marion.

The story does not center on the struggles of gay men in Hong Kong; instead, it exposes how the burden of their concealed desires and social nonconformity is transferred onto women. All the pressure falls on Rose's shoulders when she knows that her husband violates the Confucian expectation. Paul's parents ask Rose to stay in the family to continue living a normal life with Paul. Also, Paul lacks the courage to come out to the public, so he begs Rose to continue performing the duty of a good wife and forgive that he has another

⁴⁶ *Idem*, p. 108.

⁴⁷ Sor-hoon Tan, “Confucian Family Ideal and Same-Sex Marriage: A Feminist Confucian Perspective”, *Hypatia*, Vol. 39, Issue 1, 2024, p. 160.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Idem*, p. 116.

life⁵⁰. Because of this expectation, Rose suffers quietly, unable to receive love or intimacy in return. Since homosexuality is rejected in Confucianism, she knows that she cannot tell her parents the truth about her marriage⁵¹. Sacrificing her emotional well-being for having a “normal” life, Rose has internalized the cultural expectation that a woman must endure hardship silently to protect the family’s image and stability. Her mother-in-law, Marion, reinforces this when she explains, “But he’s also always cared much for you. There’s nothing to stop you from having children and leading a perfectly normal life”⁵². Marion’s words imply that personal happiness does not matter if Rose stays in the marriage. In Marion’s opinion, Rose’s individual suffering is irrelevant if the external appearance of a “normal” family can be maintained. In this context, Rose is expected not only to accept Paul’s sexual disinterest but also to perform the role of a loyal wife and future mother. Although Rose feels painful, she decides to suppress her pain to maintain harmony expected by Confucian values. She reflects:

Once more, the power Paul Sr. exuded encased me. It was safe here, in this world, with these people who could live dual lives. They were asking me to be part of it. Marion had given me more than I ever expected; she loved and approved of me, unconditionally.⁵³

What she says suggests that she wants to find safety in her submission to the current situation. When she says Marion “loved and approved of me, unconditionally,”⁵⁴ she is left with no choice but to leave a life where she is expected to perform a wife’s role for the sake of familial unity. This approval comes not from Rose being her authentic self, but from her willingness to conform to protect the family. In this way, the novel shows that Rose’s silence and compliance result from a cultural system that prizes obedience, sacrifice, and appearances over emotional honesty and fulfillment.

Left with no choice in this Confucian family, she begins to rationalize her emotionally unfulfilling marriage by convincing herself that she should prioritize collective stability over individual emotion:

⁵⁰ *Idem*, p.137.

⁵¹ *Idem*, p. 117.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

What more perfect husband could I want? What more acceptance did I need? Was this any worse than the family I came from, with Regina and her suicides? We were part of the mongrel caste who belonged together, who found a sheltered haven in our tiny city where the proper face was all that counted. In this time and space, it was a home that embraced us all.⁵⁵

Her rhetorical questions in the passage are more like a defense mechanism to persuade herself to accept the loveless and sexless marriage with Paul. Rather than expressing dissatisfaction, Rose reframes acceptance and public approval as viable alternatives to personal happiness. This internal rationalization reflects the deeply embedded power of Confucian family values: “Ordinary people... were fully empowered to act in family roles,”⁵⁶ and thus internalized those roles as natural and inevitable⁵⁷. In this context, Rose does not perceive her sacrifice as submission, but as a way to find emotional comfort within a patriarchal family structure that grants women limited agency. She clearly knows that she is part of the “mongrel caste”⁵⁸. Yet, Rose finds solace in the shared commitment to maintaining order in society. Being asked whether she minds sharing her husband with another man, Rose explicitly claims that she has no choice⁵⁹. Her decision to bear with this untenable situation suggests that she cares about the family’s stability. Ebrey emphasizes that the strength of Confucianism lies in its fusion of emotional, political, and social structures, where “family as a political, economic, and religious unit”⁶⁰ sustains conformity over time. Rose’s final assertion that “it was a home that embraced us all”⁶¹ is endurance rather than a declaration of freedom. This endurance further reveals that Confucian patriarchy suppresses women’s autonomy and freedom to express their thoughts and emotions.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Patricia Ebrey, “The Chinese Family and the Spread of Confucian Values”, in *The East Asian Region: Confucian Heritage and Its Modern Adaptation*, (ed.) Gilbert Rozman, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1991, p. 48.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Xu Xi, *op. cit.*, p. 117.

⁵⁹ *Idem*, p. 183.

⁶⁰ Patricia Ebrey, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

⁶¹ Xu Xi, *op. cit.*, p. 117.

Resisting within Constraints: The Limited Agency of Rose under Confucian and Colonial Structures

A feminist understanding of autonomy emphasizes more than just the ability to make independent choices—it requires the capacity to reflect on one’s deeper values, desires, and commitments, and to live in accordance with them, even in the face of opposition:

Autonomy, to reiterate, involves reflecting on one’s deeper wants, values, and commitments, reaffirming them, and behaving and living in accordance with them even in the face of at least minimal resistance from others.⁶²

In Rose’s case, such autonomy is systematically denied. Confined by the traditional Chinese family structure, she carries the emotional burden and social blame for reproductive failure. Rose reflects:

I was pregnant once, I wanted to yell at my parents, Paul’s parents, everyone. It had to be Paul, possibly a low sperm counts or some readily understandable explanation. He wouldn’t even entertain the thought, not given his tendency. So no one would ever be sure, but the blame could fall on me, the woman, the way it did in all Chinese life. And who could argue with that⁶³?

Rose’s reflection on her abortion suggests that women have no power to claim their body autonomy in Chinese familial and cultural structures. She feels frustrated with her situation and hopes to seek help from her parents, Paul’s parents, and everyone around her, but she realizes that her pain would be dismissed within the gendered logic of the Confucian society. While Paul avoids scrutiny even if he is gay and possibly infertile, Rose anticipates that society will blame her: “the blame could fall on me, the woman, the way it did in all Chinese life”⁶⁴. The unfair treatment faced by Rose critiques that gendered expectations enforced within traditional Chinese culture make women suffer and difficult to demand justice. Women are expected to silently bear the burden of reproductive failure, while men remain shielded by patriarchal privilege. Rose’s use of “the

⁶² Marilyn Friedman, “Autonomy, Social Disruption, and Women”, in *Autonomy, Gender, Politics, Studies in Feminist Philosophy*, New York, Oxford Academic, 2003, p. 99.

⁶³ Xu Xi, *op. cit.*, p. 139.

⁶⁴ Xu Xi, *op. cit.*

way it did in all Chinese life” suggests that this is not a singular injustice but part of a long-standing cultural pattern in which women’s bodies are sites of familial expectation, duty, and control. Her experience underscores the deeply embedded patriarchal norms that equate womanhood with biological and social sacrifice, and that expect women to endure silence, shame, and blame to uphold the illusion of familial harmony.

While Rose may appear to reject the life imposed on her, her retreat is shaped more by quiet resignation than radical resistance. Her departure does not signal a decisive break from patriarchal oppression but a negotiated move still marked by fear, habit, and emotional compromise. In this way, Rose embodies what Homi Bhabha terms “colonial mimicry”⁶⁵: a strategy of partial alignment with Western norms as a form of survival, not liberation. The colonized imitates the colonizers’ manners as a means of survival or to appropriate power for their own purposes, which aligns with Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s warning against the tendency in Western feminist discourse to idealize Western values and simplify non-Western women’s experiences. Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s critiques Western feminism’s tendency to homogenize non-Western women’s experiences:

An analysis of “sexual difference” in the form of a cross-culturally singular, monolithic notion of patriarchy... leads to the construction of a similarly reductive and homogeneous notion of what I call the “Third World Difference”—that stable, a historical something that apparently oppresses most if not all the women in these countries⁶⁶.

As Mohanty warns, reading all acts of non-conformity as signs of liberation risks reproducing a monolithic notion of patriarchy and the third world difference, which is a reductive lens that erases the complexity of women’s lives. Rose’s journey, therefore, should not be framed as a triumph of Western individualism or feminist freedom. However, her agency is still limited. Her choices are constrained, reactive, and often masked in socially acceptable forms. She resists, but within limits. Xu Xi presents a character caught in the tension between selfhood and sacrifice, autonomy and obedience. Rose’s path reveals

⁶⁵ Homi K. Bhabha, “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse”, in *The Location of Culture*, London, Routledge, 1994, p. 85–92.

⁶⁶ Chandra Talpade Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses”, *boundary 2*, vol. XII, no. 3, 1984, p. 335.

how women's pursuit of agency is often filtered through the very structures they seek to escape—patriarchy, colonial modernity, and familial duty. Her autonomy is not absent, but incomplete, which is negotiated within systems that demand silence, compromise, and restraint.

Rose's subsequent attempts to reclaim agency through an extramarital relationship and eventual plans to leave Hong Kong which appear to be autonomous choices that are superficial. She actively seeks empowerment and autonomy through her extramarital relationship with Elliot. Unlike her sexless and emotionally constrained marriage with Paul, her relationship with Elliot enables her to experience intimacy on her own terms. As she reflects, "Once he knew I would continue to see him again, he was in less of a hurry to arrange each meeting, although each time we made love, I knew he reached deeper inside me"⁶⁷. However, her love fantasy is soon shattered. As Rose gets to know Elliot, she realizes that Elliot cannot be fully committed to their relationship because he is also constrained by family matters, such as taking care of his daughter. This physical expression of closeness is, therefore, more of her hope of intimacy, which cannot be fulfilled. Similarly, Rose's decision to leave Hong Kong for the United States seems courageous, especially given her father's disapproval. Yet, her justification reveals her lingering entrapment in Confucian norms. She does not frame her departure as a bold pursuit of self-liberation but instead couches it in familial obligation to care for her sister Regina, reinforcing the expectation that she must remain composed and dutiful. This perception both comforts and constrains her. Rose internalizes these traits, defining herself through emotional restraint rather than assertive action. Even her decision to divorce Paul is not fully embraced:

The absurdity of our marriage was farcical, but I still couldn't help feeling devoted to him. I had thought a great deal about divorce, but it seemed drastic and frightening. The best thing about Paul was that we didn't really have to talk about a lot of what he called "the administrative details" of marriage.⁶⁸

She recognizes how empty and performative her marriage has become, yet she remains emotionally bound to its structure. The thought of divorce pops into her mind, but she feels it is "drastic and frightening,"⁶⁹ which suggests that

⁶⁷ Xu Xi, *op. cit.*, p. 149.

⁶⁸ Xu Xi, *op. cit.*

⁶⁹ *Idem*, p. 297.

she has internalized fear of disruption outweighs her pursuit of self-fulfillment. Moreover, she tries to convince herself that her marriage is not that unacceptable after all. By mentioning that the “best thing” about Paul is that they just need to pretend to a good couple, Rose believes that emotional avoidance and silence have become comforts rather than constraints. Thus, Rose’s departure is not a decisive break from patriarchal oppression but a quiet, negotiated retreat, a move shaped as much by compromise as by resistance.

Conclusions

Hong Kong Rose exposes the emotional and social struggles faced by Hong Kong women, yet Xu Xi ultimately fails to offer a liberating representation for her protagonist. Although the novel vividly captures Rose’s suffering under Confucian patriarchy and colonial modernity, it stops short of granting her genuine agency or an alternative vision of freedom. Rose remains emotionally restrained and hesitant, unable to make decisive choices about her life or challenge the systems that confine her. Her identity continues to be shaped by obedience, guilt, and dependence on male authority—whether that of her husband, her father-in-law, or her lover. While Xu Xi successfully portrays the authenticity of a Hong Kong woman’s inner conflict—torn between Chinese familial duty and Western notions of individuality—the narrative reinforces rather than transcends her constrained identity. Rose’s resistance is quiet and internal, often expressed through endurance rather than transformation. Her inability to find a way out mirrors Hong Kong’s own fractured condition as a postcolonial society caught between empires, struggling to define itself yet bound by inherited structures of power. Thus, although *Hong Kong Rose* invites readers to critique the oppressive systems that shape women’s lives, it ultimately reproduces the very limitations it seeks to expose. By leaving Rose lost, hesitant, and emotionally subdued, Xu Xi provides not an emancipated vision of womanhood, but a poignant portrayal of how the search for autonomy can collapse under the weight of cultural and colonial constraints.

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L'ORIENT COMME *FATA MORGANA* DANS LES RELATIONS DE VOYAGE AUX PAYS ROUMAINS DE STANISLAS BELLANGER

Nicu Diaconiuc*

The Orient as a Fata Morgana in Stanislas Bellanger's Travel Accounts of the Romanian Principalities

Abstract: The journey from France to the Romanian principalities in the fourth decade of the 19th century was counted in the eyes of Westerners as a displacement from the center to the periphery of European culture. In this article, we will have a look at what resulted from the comparison of the image of an area grossly referred to as “the Orient” in the earlier stages of the journey, with the image that resulted after exploring it, while this strongly biased Orient turns out to be receding as the quest progresses. We observe how the main character, a young French scholar who departs with an ethnocentric vision and the idea that Vienna is at the gates of the civilized world, tries to gather proof about the Orientality of the lands and cultures which open up to him, but eventually realizes that only at his destination city, Bucharest, he can truly affirm that he has entered the Oriental world which had been luring him eastwards like a Fata Morgana.

Keywords: Orient, Balkans, bias, ethnocentrism, Orient, Romanian principalities.

Regrettablement méconnu, le Français Stanislas Bellanger (1814–1859) reste, pour les Roumains, l'auteur étranger de l'une des plus vastes œuvres dédiées aux Pays Roumains : il s'agit d'un total de plus de 1000 pages au long desquelles il parle de notre peuple, de notre histoire, habitudes et mœurs. En ce qui concerne l'étendue de cet ensemble de recueils, il n'a été dépassé jusqu'à présent que par son contemporain, Jean-Alexandre Vaillant, professeur au collège St. Sava et l'un

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des plus marquants formateurs en culture française pour les représentants de la génération de 1848¹.

Critiqué par P. Eliade pour être « infiniment prolix »² et qualifié par N. Iorga comme « pot-pourri s'étendant sur tous les rebords habituels de la dilution littéraire »³, l'une des premières caractéristiques de l'écriture de Bellanger que le lecteur peut observer dès qu'il ouvre l'une de ses volumes, est la fécondité. Rejetant l'affiliation à un mouvement littéraire, car, dans sa brève vie parsemée de voyages (qui ont signifié l'absence de la communauté littéraire parisienne), notre voyageur n'a pas eu le temps de s'insérer très profondément dans une certaine idéologie, ni de se laisser guider par une (seule) direction esthétique. S'il le faut, on songe à une certaine appartenance aux attitudes et idéaux romantiques, qui étaient synonymes de « sentimental », « exalté » ou « qui défend une cause avec passion »⁴, en même temps qu'à la tradition viatique de la deuxième moitié du XVIII^e siècle, empreinte d'épique, d'histoires et se présentant sous la forme d'un journal de voyage.

Tourangeau de provenance mais établi à Paris dès son adolescence, Bellanger s'affirme à partir de 1840 comme auteur de feuilletons dont la principale source d'inspiration fut son voyage de 1835–1836 en Orient. Les récits avec lesquels il tient les rubriques destinées aux lecteurs passionnés de voyages du *Siècle*⁵, du *Temps*⁶, de *La Démocratie pacifique*⁷ et même de la *Revue étrangère de la littérature, des sciences et des arts*⁸ de Saint-Petersbourg pendant plusieurs

¹ Voir aussi notre article Nicu Diaconiuc, « Du stéréotype à l'interculturalité dans *Trois ans de promenades en Europe et en Asie* (1842) et *Le Kéroutza* (1846) de Stanislas Bellanger », in Sarga Moussa, Vanezia Pârlea (dir.), *Le voyage dans les Balkans. L'invention d'un espace de la frontière (XIX^e-XXI^e siècles)*, Grenoble, UGA Éditions, 2024, p. 41–60.

² Pompiliu Eliade, *De l'influence française sur l'esprit public en Roumanie*, Paris, Éd. Ernest Leroux, 1898, p. 415.

³ « Acest pot-pourri întins peste toate marginile obișnuite ale diluării literare », trad. propre de Nicolae Iorga, *Istoria românilor prin călători [L'histoire des Roumains à travers les voyageurs]*, t. III, Bucarest, Ed. Casei Școalelor, 1929, p. 218.

⁴ Ce sont les définitions du mot selon le Trésor de la langue française informatisé, [http://stella.atilf.fr/Dendien/scripts/tlfiv5/visusel.exe?14;s=334282560;r=1;nat=;sol=5](http://stella.atilf.fr/Dendien/scripts/tlfiv5/visusel.exe?14;s=334282560;r=1;nat=;sol=5;), consulté le 10 mars 2025.

⁵ Voir, par exemple, S. Bellanger, « Le passage des monts Krappacks », in *Le Siècle*, an 5, nos. 50–52, Paris, 20–22 févr. 1840.

⁶ Voir *infra*.

⁷ S. Bellanger, « Fragments d'un voyage en Moldo-Valachie, 1836–1837 », in *La Démocratie pacifique*, nos. 33–45, 14^e année, Paris, 2–14 août 1845.

⁸ S. Bellanger, « Le passage des Monts Krappacks », in *Revue étrangère de la littérature, des sciences et des arts*, t. XXXIII, Saint-Petersbourg, F. Bellizard et C^{ie}, 1840, p. 637–654.

semaines entre la période 1840–1845 ont formé la base pour la publication de ses deux ouvrages : *Trois ans de promenades en Europe et en Asie*⁹ et *Le Kéroutza*¹⁰.

Parti initialement pour Vienne en bon compagnon de son ami le docteur A*** dont il veut que l'identité reste secrète¹¹, le Tourangeau reçoit, arrivant dans la capitale de l'Empire autrichien, une lettre de son père qui lui demande de poursuivre son chemin jusqu'à Bucarest pour régler quelques affaires sur l'héritage de son oncle mort dans cette capitale. Comme il ne peut pas se soustraire à cette commission, Bellanger commence à se projeter une image de cet espace vers lequel il se dirigera. Jeune et encore ignorant sur l'histoire et la culture des Principautés, Stanislas laisse ses premières pensées porter sur l'administration et le cadre géographique de ces contrées, en précisant deux éléments : qu'il ira « en Turquie »¹² et qu'il devra franchir les « Krappacks, [...] là où elle [la neige] tombe presque incessamment, pendant la mauvaise saison ! »¹³.

Quelques pages plus tard, ce tableau hivernal se transformera – étant donné qu'il se trouve en fin de novembre – dans une véritable angoisse pour la traversée des montagnes, lorsqu'il se rend à Buda pour visiter un compatriote français moribond qui avait souffert des gels incroyables dans la traversée des Balkans :

Privé absolument de sang, de force, d'énergie, ni physique, ni morale, cet infortuné ressemblait plutôt à un squelette qu'à un être vivant. [...] De ma vie je n'oublierai ce cruel tableau ; j'en fus longtemps affecté ; il me revenait sans cesse à l'esprit. Et nous allions nous-mêmes traverser bientôt, non pas les Balkans, mais, ce qui revient au même, les Krappacks ! la perspective était rassurante¹⁴ !

Ses premières attentes de découvrir l'Orient tournent en fait autour de Vienne, sa destination initiale, capitale de l'Autriche, dont il souligne l'étymologie :

⁹ S. Bellanger, *Trois ans de promenades en Europe et en Asie*, 2 tomes, Paris, Arthus Bertrand, 1842. Pour l'économie, nous allons appeler ce récit tout court *Trois ans de promenades* tout au long de notre article.

¹⁰ S. Bellanger, *Le Kéroutza. Voyage en Moldo-Valachie*, 2 tomes, Paris, 1846, Librairie française et étrangère.

¹¹ Il s'agit de Jean Andrieux (1816–1871), qui fonda un établissement hydrothérapique à Brioude, en Auvergne, en 1847. Dans l'article « Voyages dans les Karpathes. Le saut du loup », in *L'Écho français*, an XVII, Paris, 18 sept. 1845, p. 1, qui est une variante de l'épisode du *Kéroutza*, Bellanger donne le nom complet du docteur, ce qui nous a éclairé sur ce personnage.

¹² S. Bellanger, *Trois ans de promenades*, t. II, p. 277.

¹³ *Idem*, p. 276.

¹⁴ *Idem*, p. 283.

« *Āsterreich*, c'est-à-dire, terre orientale »¹⁵. Mēme si cette destination particulière ne semble pas vraiment susciter une extase chez le voyageur, l'« Introduction » de son premier livre est assez claire en ce qui concerne les voyages lointains. Peu importe la destination, mieux vaut voyager que faire « exclusivement de cette grande ville l'alpha et l'oméga de [son] existence »¹⁶. Ainsi, Bellanger idéalise toute tentative de s'éloigner du foyer paternel, de la ville ou du pays d'origine, Vienne y compris.

Mais, quittant la France et au fur et à mesure qu'il avance vers l'Autriche, on voit cet enthousiasme se transformer dans une anti-idéalisation. Jugeant d'après les mauvaises expériences qu'il a dans les chambres d'hôtel en Allemagne, où les lits étaient de plus en plus mauvais à mesure qu'il se dirige vers l'Est, on entend échapper ce sombre scénario de la bouche du jeune voyageur lorsqu'il se trouve à Munich :

Vous devez vous rappeler que, lors de notre entrée en Allemagne, ne voyant dans les lits que des draps grands comme des serviettes, vous vous êtes vivement récréé. Chaque matin, disiez-vous, vous les trouviez sous vos reins tordus comme des câbles, et cela vous gênait : aujourd'hui que vous n'en trouvez aucun, ce qui ne vous offre plus le même inconvéniént, vous jetez feu et flammes. Que sera-ce donc si, à notre arrivée à Vienne, nous ne trouvons ni draps, ni édredons, ni lits, quels qu'ils soient ¹⁷ ?

Le narrateur substitue ainsi l'enthousiasme de sa prochaine incursion dans cette capitale rayonnante de la musique classique, véritable sanctuaire de la culture européenne, aux soucis plus terrestres tels les lits. En guise de compensation pour le long silence autour de l'arrivée à cette destination, Bellanger consacre quelques pages à cette ville, au moment de leur arrivée à Mariahilfe¹⁸.

Et c'est ainsi que, arrivé à Vienne, la *peripeteia* se déclenche, de sorte que le reste du voyage de Bellanger se place sous le signe de l'inattendu. Prévu pour deux ou trois mois et ayant comme destination Vienne, le périple de l'écrivain se prolongera jusqu'à l'automne de 1836, comprenant un séjour d'environ dix mois à Bucarest¹⁹. Face à la lettre de son père dans la capitale autrichienne, le

¹⁵ *Idem*, p. 148.

¹⁶ *Idem*, t. I, p. 2.

¹⁷ *Idem.*, t. I, p. 363.

¹⁸ Quartier de Vienne.

¹⁹ La date exacte de son retour en France n'est nulle part mentionnée.

héros se confronte à une lutte avec le destin : son désir de profiter d'un séjour culturel dans cette cité tellement convoitée doit être vaincu au profit du devoir moral et du prestige familial. Ainsi, optimiste, voire opportuniste, il tente sa chance, visant à satisfaire son désir de découverte de l'Orient :

Non pas que je regrettasse le voyage en lui-même, bien au contraire, j'en étais charmé ; je ne regrettais que la précipitation avec laquelle il me fallait le faire, et cependant, j'en sentais la nécessité²⁰.

La même scène donne au lecteur l'occasion de comprendre le choix du titre, qui jusqu'alors avait été bizarre pour un récit de voyage jusqu'à Vienne, et de quelques semaines :

Je songeais à la singularité des événements. J'étais parti pour trois mois, et voilà que maintenant m'arrivaient des ordres qui m'éloignaient pour.... savais-je combien de temps ? peut-être trois ans²¹ !

Toutefois, cette formule continuera à intriguer le lecteur même une fois la lecture de son cycle viatique achevée, puisque *Trois ans de promenades* ne raconte pas son arrivée en ce qu'on appelle aujourd'hui « l'Asie » et se limite bel et bien à l'Europe. Ce n'est qu'en faisant des recherches supplémentaires qu'on apprend qu'il y eut deux autres récits de voyage parus à la même époque dans *Le Commerce* et *Le Temps*, qui peuvent constituer une continuation du *Kéroutza*. Le deuxième surtout, *Voyage sur la Mer Noire. De Galatz à Gounièh*²², suggère que le voyage de Bellanger s'est poursuivi, après les Pays Roumains, jusqu'en Transcaucasie, ce qui justifierait le projet de Bellanger de raconter ses *Trois ans de promenades*. Malheureusement, ces deux autres récits n'ont pas été publiés en volume²³ et la promesse des lignes suivantes sur les quatre volumes à suivre, ne sera respectée qu'à moitié par les deux volumes du *Kéroutza* :

²⁰ S. Bellanger, *Trois ans de promenades*, t. II, p. 278.

²¹ *Idem*, p. 277.

²² S. Bellanger, « Voyage sur la Mer Noire. De Galatz à Gounièh », in *Le Temps*, nos. 4030, 4093, 4099, 4123, Paris, 26 décembre 1840 – 9 février 1841.

²³ L'autre feuilleton s'intitule « Voyage sur le Danube. De Belgrade à Galatz », in *Le Commerce*, nos. 241/1840, 270/1840, 298/1840, 320/1840, 1/1841, Paris, 28 août 1840 – 1 janvier 1841. Voir aussi G. Cioranescu, *op. cit.*, p. 58.

Peut-être trouvera-t-on étrange que nous passions aussi lestement sur Vienne, l'un des points les plus intéressants du voyage. Comme il en sera de même de la Hongrie et de la Transylvanie, contrées cependant fort curieuses, nous prions le lecteur de vouloir bien d'abord se reporter au titre de l'ouvrage [...]. Enfin, nous lui ferons observer que ces deux volumes ne sont pour ainsi dire qu'une introduction. Quatre autres volumes suivront bientôt leurs aînés, et nous mettront à même de revenir avec empressement sur les lieux que la rapidité forcée de la promenade nous empêche de visiter aujourd'hui aussi complètement que nous désirerions²⁴.

Observons encore qu'écrire le récit d'un voyage qui n'est pas un voyage de découverte de terres vierges nécessite toujours un *choix* entre la tradition ou le refus de la tradition. En ce qui concerne Vienne, le choix de Bellanger s'oriente vers la variante non-conformiste, puisque la tradition des Voyages qui passent par cette capitale voulait qu'elle soit décrite en détail.

Mais en fait, qu'est-ce que cet Orient vers lequel Bellanger se dirige ou qu'il a hâte de découvrir, et dont on découvre qu'il est ailleurs à chaque fois où il y fait référence ? Où commence-t-il ?

Comme on l'a vu, la première référence à une « terre orientale » se produit avec l'entrée en Autriche. Mais cette fois-ci ce n'est qu'un étalement de ses connaissances en histoire. Se bornant à expliquer que c'était le nom que donnaient les peuples occidentaux à la Haute-Pannonie – explication par laquelle il se place déjà dans une certaine mesure du côté orientaliste au sens saïdien²⁵ (avant-la-lettre) –, il ne confirme ni ne rejette que l'Autriche ferait partie de cet « Orient ». Concentrons-nous en ce qui suit à définir l'image de cet espace comme résultat de l'affrontement entre ses attentes et ce qu'il trouve sur le terrain.

Comme souligné plusieurs fois par la critique de la littérature viatique²⁶, le XIX^e siècle a marqué l'épanouissement et l'affirmation du récit de voyage comme genre littéraire de plein droit. En même temps, le diptyque de Bellanger qui constitue notre sujet s'inscrit dans un type plus spécifique de relation de voyage, qui connut, lui aussi, son apogée, et aussi, selon certains critiques, son chant du cygne au même siècle : la relation orientale²⁷.

²⁴ S. Bellanger, *Trois ans de promenades*, t. II, p. 280.

²⁵ Cf. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, trad. Catherine Malamoud, Paris, Seuil, 2005.

²⁶ Voir, par exemple, Sylvain Venayre, *Panorama du voyage 1780–1920*, Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 2012, p. 9.

²⁷ Voir Sarga Moussa, *La relation orientale, Enquête sur la communication dans les récits de*

Bien que l'orientalisme en tant que discipline se soit constitué dès le XVII^e siècle²⁸, que la littérature du XVIII^e soit imprégnée de turqueries²⁹, et que le nombre de voyageurs français en Orient qui laissèrent des comptes rendus de leurs aventures augmente au Siècle des Lumières, il fallut attendre le XIX^e siècle pour que toutes ces démarches fusionnent et que des personnalités douées d'une double qualité : voyageurs-écrivains s'affirment. Les « géographes de cabinet »³⁰ des siècles précédents, ainsi que les écrivains qui proposaient des voyages par procuration (comme c'est le cas de Voltaire ou Montesquieu), seront remplacés par des écrivains qui prendront la route pour expérimenter de façon authentique le frisson de l'aventure avant de se mettre à écrire leurs récits.

Dans ce contexte, il est nécessaire de rappeler que le XIX^e avait amené une véritable crise du héros, et du roman, par conséquent. À la recherche de nouveaux sujets et de nouvelles icônes (on ne saurait trop insister sur cette nécessité de l'homme moderne de se créer des images, des modèles), les voyageurs attirés par l'Orient vont subir une redéfinition du soi, au contact avec cette nouvelle culture. C'est de ce type de renouvellement identitaire que va surgir le changement de registre observé par les exégètes du XIX^e, allant d'une « anthropologie de l'im-personnalité » à une « mise en honneur du moi »³¹. C'est en fait à ce niveau – de la mise en question du Moi – que se produit la superposition entre l'évolution du récit de voyage et celle de la relation orientale, au XIX^e siècle.

À cette période, envisager la présence de l'Autre – de cet Oriental qu'on dévisageait, comme l'affirmera Saïd un siècle plus tard dans son *Orientalism*, d'un regard supérieur –, passera, avec la tentative d'entrer en dialogue avec lui, à un niveau supérieur. Ainsi, les romantiques feront de cette relation orientale « un rituel d'initiation culturelle »³² qui obligera tous les nouveaux venus à suivre les mêmes sentiers battus.

En ce qui concerne les deux ouvrages de Bellanger, dès qu'il fait halte à Vienne, les choses commencent à s'embrouiller et à prendre une couleur

voyage en Orient (1811-1861), Paris, Klincksieck, 1995.

²⁸ Voir Henry Laurens, « L'orientalisme français : un parcours historique », in Youssef Courbage, Manfred Kropp (dir.), *Penser l'Orient*, Beyrouth, Presses de l'IFPO, 2004, p. 103.

²⁹ Prenons, par exemple, *Les Lettres persanes* de Montesquieu, *Zadig*, *Candide* ou *Zaïre* de Voltaire.

³⁰ Voir Odile Gannier, *La littérature de voyage*, Paris, Ellipses, 2001, p. 12.

³¹ Georges Gusdorf, *L'homme romantique*, Paris, Payot, 1984, p. 20.

³² Belinda Cannone, « Au spectacle du monde », in *Récits de spectateurs : raconter le spectacle, modéliser l'expérience, XVII^e-XX^e siècle*, Rennes, Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2018, p. 51.

orientale. Mais celle-ci n'est pas la seule nouvelle teinture qu'acquiert l'image exposée par notre voyageur. En fait, il s'agit de deux nouvelles dimensions que prend son voyage : l'orientalisme et la découverte de l'Europe de l'Est. Ces deux coordonnées ne sont pas synonymes puisqu'elles s'appliquent à des espaces géographiques aux limites différentes (plus précisément, l'Orient se trouve aussi bien sur des parties de l'Europe que dans l'Asie, mais on aurait tort à dire qu'il inclut toute l'Europe de l'Est), qui se croisent sur une aire assez étendue qui inclut les Pays roumains.

Une fois la proposition acceptée, le voyageur prend sa nouvelle destination, accompagné par un mystérieux émissaire appelé M. G***³³ et va ouvrir largement ses yeux aux nouveaux lieux et gens qu'il rencontre. Ainsi, l'Autre autant recherché par Bellanger prend, tout à tour, tant de formes et de nationalités : l'Allemand, l'Autrichien, le Hongrois, le « Schlavaque », le Serbe et finalement le « Valaque », terme par lequel il se réfère, dans *Trois ans de promenades*, aux Transylvains et aux Valaques, puisqu'au long des pages suivantes il va raconter son passage par Timișoara, Lugoj, Brașov et Câmpina, et que l'arrivée dans la capitale ne constituera que l'objet du livre suivant, *Le Kéroutza*.

L'Orient est, aux yeux de Bellanger, un amoncellement de modes de vie, d'outils et surtout de peuples. Le cosmopolitisme et l'hybridité en sont deux caractéristiques très importantes qu'il remarque dès l'arrivée dans la partie de centrale de l'Empire autrichien. Avant ce moment, le narrateur nous laisse l'impression d'une homogénéité sinon d'une uniformité des populations qu'il rencontre dans les différentes régions, comme si les Bavarois étaient les seuls habitants de Munich et les Autrichiens les seuls de Salzburg, par exemple. Il ne fait que deux ou trois exceptions pour raconter des péripéties des officiers français qui ont entrepris des missions en Autriche et pour évoquer des histoires d'antan dont des Romains ou des Juifs étaient les protagonistes.

La scène où il doit choisir un voiturier, à la place centrale de Pest, est représentative pour cette hétérogénéité. Cet endroit offre un spectacle où règnent tant le cosmopolitisme que le chaos :

Sous ces hangars étaient entassés pêle-mêle cent chariots, cinq cents chevaux et leurs conducteurs. Il n'y avait qu'à choisir.

³³ Nous l'avons identifié dans la personne du vicomte Antoine-Louis de Grammont, auquel Gilles Bardy a dédié une ample étude biographique. Voir G. Bardy, *Antoine-Louis de Grammont, un Français agent russe dans les Principautés roumaines au XIX^e siècle*, Bucarest, Ed. Enciclopedică, 2005.

[...] Nous fîmes donc le tour de la place, afin d'examiner les attelages. Il y avait là des chevaux de tous les pays, hongrois, transylvains, galliciens, buckowiens, tartares, valaques, serviens, schlavaques, illyriens, bohêmes, polonais. Les uns, la corne lisse, noirâtre, arrondie, bien fouillée, étaient des hongrois ; les autres, les genoux décharnés et parfaitement emboîtés, étaient des valaques ; ceux-ci, les paturons courts et lunés avec un art admirable, étaient des serviens ; ceux-là, les jambes effilées, la poitrine large, l'échine tremblotante, étaient des bohêmes ; [...] les buckoviens, les schlavaques, les illyriens, les polonais, tous se distinguant par un signe quelconque facile à saisir³⁴.

À partir des fragments comme celui cité ci-dessus on observe comment chez Bellanger le pittoresque – catégorie esthétique valorisée aussi bien par les écrivains-voyageurs que par les romantiques³⁵ –, naît d'un paradoxe entre l'horrible et le comique. Cette marque d'un cosmopolitisme de plus en plus accentué, poussé jusqu'au métissage, est pour Bellanger la meilleure preuve qu'il a quitté un Occident où, à ses yeux, règnent l'ordre et la cohérence. En Transylvanie, terre habitée par trois peuples, le métissage est allé au point où le vrai élément autochtone soit devenu difficile à distinguer :

Trois peuples différents s'en sont rendus maîtres, se divisant et se subdivisant à l'infini. Ce sont d'abord des Saxons [...] ; puis, des Sicules, ou Pactzinacites³⁶ amenés par Attila, et si tristement célèbres sous le nom de Szecklers ; [...] enfin des Valaques. On peut dire à juste titre de cette contrée magnifique, « que Rome n'est plus dans Rome, » car elle contient moins de Transylvaniens, proprement dits, que d'étrangers. La métamorphose a dévoré l'indigène ; il n'existe plus qu'en souvenir³⁷.

Ainsi, on pourrait comparer l'entrée de Bellanger en Hongrie à l'arrivée d'autrefois du comte Louis-Philippe de Ségur en Pologne, qui éprouva cette

³⁴ B. Cannone, *art. cit.*, p. 291–292.

³⁵ Voir, par exemple, Yvon Le Scanff, *Le paysage romantique et l'expérience du sublime*, Seyssel, Champ Vallon, 2007.

³⁶ Petchenègues.

³⁷ S. Bellanger, *Trois ans de promenades*, t. II, p. 328–329. À part les trois peuples qui « s'en sont rendus maîtres », Bellanger précise qu'il s'agit d'une terre « des Hongrois : l'Erdely-Orzag », cf. *Ibid.*, p. 328. La faible présence des « Transylvano-Valaques » peut s'expliquer par ce que, au long de son itinéraire, Bellanger passe par des villes (telles Sibiu ou Braşov) où ce peuple n'avait pas de droit de résidence intra-muros.

mission³⁸ comme une incursion dans une civilisation totalement distincte de celle de l'Occident et, comme les délimitations géographiques à l'époque ne connaissaient pas le concept d'« Europe Centrale », dès qu'on s'éloignait des grandes villes de l'Empire autrichien et de la Prusse, on pouvait se considérer comme sur un nouveau continent.

En fait, comme le montre Larry Wolff dans son *Inventing Eastern Europe*, c'est au XVIII^e siècle que le concept d'Europe de l'Est fut inventé. Si, depuis le siècle des grandes découvertes, les Français pensaient qu'ils étaient voués à une mission civilisatrice envers tous les peuples en dehors du monde chrétien ou européen, au XVIII^e siècle ils eurent la révélation que les peuples situés dans l'Est de l'Europe pouvaient également profiter de cette mission civilisatrice³⁹. Célèbre partisan de cette théorie, le comte de Ségur, cité par Larry Wolff dans *Inventing Eastern Europe* (1994), avait découvert, à l'occasion de son voyage en Pologne en 1784, que ce pays appartenait à un autre monde, à une autre civilisation :

Mais, dès qu'on entre en Pologne, on croit sortir entièrement de l'Europe, et les regards sont frappés d'un spectacle nouveau : une immense contrée, presque entièrement couverte de sapins toujours verts, mais toujours tristes ; [...] une population pauvre, esclave ; de sales villages ; des chaumières peu différentes des huttes sauvages ; tout ferait penser qu'on a reculé de dix siècles, et qu'on se retrouve au milieu de ces hordes des Huns, des Scythes, des Vénètes, des Slaves et des Sarmates⁴⁰.

Si l'on compare cette description avec celle que Bellanger fait des villages hongrois, on constate un rapprochement sémantique assez clair. Sauf que, pour la Hongrie, les aspects que notre voyageur évoque qui suggèrent un décalage de civilisation, outre la construction des maisons et leur simplicité :

³⁸ Voir Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe* (1994). Quant à nous, nous avons employé la traduction roumaine, *Inventarea Europei de Est. Harta civilizației în Epoca Luminilor*, trad. B. Rizzoli, Bucarest, Humanitas, 2000. Voir l'« Introduction » et le chapitre I, p. 15–50 de l'édition citée.

³⁹ Voir aussi N. Diaconiuc « Une femme de diplomate. Les Pays Roumains vus par Christine Reinhard, en 1806 », in *Limbă și cultură. Actele Sesiunii anuale de comunicări științifice a studenților, masteranzilor și doctoranzilor*, no. 1, [en ligne], éd. Mihaela Zamfirescu, Bucarest, Éd. de l'Université de Bucarest, 2020, p. 276.

⁴⁰ Louis-Philippe de Ségur, « Mémoires, souvenirs et anecdotes », in *Bibliothèque des mémoires relatifs à l'histoire de France pendant le 18^e siècle*, vol. XIX, éd. M. F. Barrière, Paris, Firmin Didot Frères, 1859, p. 300.

Bien heureux le voyageur qui, dans la saison rigoureuse, trouve, après une longue et fatigante étape, un hangar pour abriter sa voiture, un puits non gelé pour donner à boire à ses chevaux, et, dans une misérable bicoque, un poêle de terre pour se chauffer lui-même et passer la nuit⁴¹,

se situent plutôt au niveau de l'insouciance pour l'agriculture « On sait combien certaines parties de la Hongrie sont stériles, incultes et désertes. On y fait souvent dix, quinze et même vingt lieues de suite sans rencontrer un village, une maison, un arbre, un oiseau. Ce sont d'immenses steppes couvertes, l'été, de sable jaune et de mousse blanche, et l'hiver, de neige durcie par le vent. »⁴² et surtout à celui des cérémonies barbares :

L'un de ces faits a rapport à une vieille coutume judiciaire que les anciens Germains nommaient la *Wehrgeld* ou *Rançon du meurtrier*. Quand un assassinat avait été commis quelque part, sans que l'on pût savoir par qui, on enterrait la victime en lui passant au cou une corde dont le bout sortait de terre. Trois jours après, on déterrait le cadavre. Chaque habitant du village devait le traîner par la ville l'espace de dix pas, répétant à voix haute une imprécation terrible prononcée solennellement par le juge, et celui-là était réputé le coupable entre les mains de qui la blessure s'ouvrait pour laisser couler un sang accusateur. Toutefois, malgré leur ferveur, n'étant pas assez convaincus de l'infailibilité de cette épreuve pour y croire aveuglément, les habitants laissaient à l'accusé la faculté de racheter par une amende proportionnée à l'importance de ses ressources, la peine qu'il avait encourue. S'il refusait de s'y soumettre, sa famille, solidaire de son crime, devait s'exécuter à sa place, et quant à lui, il était honteusement chassé du canton pour ne plus jamais y rentrer. [...]

Le jour où nous traversâmes le petit village de Gartdzy⁴³, deux cents paysans traînaient sans pitié une pauvre jeune femme, assassinée sans que l'on sût par qui. Plus de la moitié du village avait déjà subi l'épreuve, et le meurtrier n'était pas encore connu. Nous ne jugeâmes pas à propos d'assister jusqu'à la fin à l'horrible exécution de cette cérémonie⁴⁴.

⁴¹ S. Bellanger, *Trois ans de promenades*, t. II, p. 302.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Toponyme que nous n'avons pas pu identifier.

⁴⁴ S. Bellanger, *Trois ans de promenades*, t. II, p. 300–302.

D'ailleurs, dès qu'il entre en Hongrie, il l'appelle « terre classique du féodalisme pur sang »⁴⁵.

Mais l'arrivée en Hongrie n'est pas seulement une incursion dans une terre ravagée par les guerres, par les carnages – une terre encore dominée par des rapports féodaux et des jeux de pouvoir ; elle est en plus un premier contact avec un espace qui sera appelé ultérieurement « poudrière des Balkans » où la violence et le combat sont chez eux. Ainsi, déjà à Vienne, Bellanger et son compagnon avaient pris la précaution de se munir des armes en vue de leur entrée en Orient. En tant que marchandise de l'Empire ottoman, le poignard dit « de Raab » est déjà présent à Vienne, ce qui montre les limites de la pénétration de cette culture orientale :

Quant aux munitions, plomb, poudre, balles, etc., nous en avons emporté de Vienne une assez grande quantité pour aller jusqu'à Bucharest. M. G*** possédait un coutelas de chasse et deux pistolets d'arçon ; moi, j'avais acheté à Pesth une bonne lame, non de Tolède, mais de Raab, dont la trempe était excellente, et je tenais en réserve deux pistolets de Lepage qui n'avaient jamais raté⁴⁶.

C'est un stéréotype qui commence à prendre contour petit à petit au XIX^e siècle, jusqu'à ce qu'au XX^e son emploi sera consacré par les guerres balkaniques, le déclenchement de la Première guerre mondiale, et ce qui sera finalement appelé « la crise des Balkans »⁴⁷. Maria Todorova a notoirement signalé ce phénomène dans son *Imaginaire des Balkans*, où elle souligne à propos des Balkans une chose qui s'applique certainement à la situation des Pays roumains dans la première moitié du XIX^e, et que l'on pourrait appliquer par extension à l'imaginaire de la Hongrie et des autres provinces de l'est et du sud de l'Empire autrichien par lesquelles passe notre voyageur, qui appartiennent toutes à cette Europe de l'Est en train d'être découverte : « C'est un fait, les Balkans ont au moins ceci de non-européen qu'ils n'arrivent jamais tout à fait à égaliser, en matière de massacre, le reste du continent »⁴⁸. C'est toujours Todorova qui tire un signal d'alarme sur ce discours « orientaliste » qu'elle pense « noyer ce qu'ils [les historiens] disent », et qu'elle confirme, en citant Saïd,

⁴⁵ *Idem*, p. 299.

⁴⁶ *Idem*, p. 353.

⁴⁷ Voir Maria Todorova, *Imaginaire des Balkans*, trad. Rachel Bouyssou, Paris, Éd. de l'EHSS, 2011, p. 21. Titre en original en anglais : *Imagining the Balkans*.

⁴⁸ *Idem*, p. 21.

assigner à cet objet un rôle de pur symbole, commodément placé hors du temps historique [...] émanant de l'institution globale qui traite de l'orient, qui en traite par des déclarations, des prises de position, des descriptions, un enseignement, une administration, un gouvernement : bref [...] un style occidental de domination, de restructuration et d'autorité sur l'Orient⁴⁹.

Bien que Bellanger ne manifeste pas des intentions claires de domination sur les Orientaux, ni sur les habitants de l'Europe de l'Est, son attitude de malaise sinon mépris envers la pauvreté et de précaution sinon angoisse face au style martial dont on tranchait les choses dans cette partie de l'Empire témoigne d'un certain orientalisme avant la lettre. En plus, dans l'histoire de cette attitude ethnocentrique notoirement débattue par Saïd, les réactions des voyageurs ont toujours été placées d'un côté ou de l'autre de ce binôme oppositionnel que forment l'effroi et l'attrance⁵⁰.

Dans le cas de Bellanger, l'effroi le pousse tantôt à prendre les précautions nécessaires, comme dans la scène dépeinte ci-dessus, tantôt – si nous pensons avec Todorova que « le balkanisme n'est pas simplement une sous-espèce d'orientalisme »⁵¹ et que l'étiquette d'Européen de l'Est a ses propres nuances comme celle de pauvreté – à une réflexion issue du trouble de l'esprit face à l'« étrange existence »⁵² d'une famille de méchants paysans valaques.

Par ailleurs, comme Saïd le mentionne, il est difficile voire impossible d'établir les limites géographiques de l'Orient – qui constitue plutôt un imaginaire qu'un espace géographique –, puisque « des mots comme *Orient* et *Occident* ne correspondent à aucune réalité stable découlant d'un fait naturel »⁵³. Todorova, en s'appuyant sur le syntagme « Orient imaginé », insiste que celui-ci se caractérise par des caractéristiques telles : la liberté (lisez : le libertinage), l'opulence, l'excès, l'élégance ou le plaisir et montre que celles-ci se retrouvent même chez certains romantiques occidentaux, qu'elle appelle « conservateurs fortunés ». En donnant l'exemple de Benjamin Disraeli, elle évoque son « élégance et plaisir [...] des moments où il s'offrait le luxe de fumer allongé, au calme, à la manière des pachas turcs »⁵⁴, ce qui constitue un imaginaire oriental.

⁴⁹ E. W. Saïd, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

⁵⁰ Cf. Francis Afférgan, *Exotisme et altérité*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1987, p. 27–28.

⁵¹ M. Todorova, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

⁵² S. Bellanger, *Trois ans de promenades*, t. II p. 332.

⁵³ *Idem*, p. 357.

⁵⁴ M. Todorova, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

Non dernièrement, notons que la longueur du voyage et les malaises qu'il éprouve finissent par produire des troubles à l'esprit de notre voyageur, et comme le moment d'arrivée à la destination vers lequel il se dirige est constamment reporté, à un moment donné la crainte lui induit presque l'impression que cette destination est illusoire. Chaque fois où l'on croit notre voyageur avoir finalement pénétré vers cet Orient qu'il désire explorer, on découvre que le « vrai » Orient est ailleurs. Comme le signalera un autre voyageur français en Turquie, Pierre Loti, « l'Orient s'en va [...]. C'est Constantinople qui bouge, s'éloigne et va s'évanouir »⁵⁵, de même Câmpina semble une destination qui aurait cette « capacité de se mouvoir »⁵⁶. On comprend alors que, mis en permanence à l'épreuve, le désir du voyageur de conquérir cet espace qui lui résiste est soumis à des variations qui créent des doutes à son esprit.

Signalons encore que, dans toute représentation de l'espace, l'organisation en est une démarche « déterminante [...] autant pour penser les démarches de conquête ou de découvertes, que pour [...] le thème de l'altérité »⁵⁷. Si F. Affergan montre que « la carte, instrument privilégié de la géographie, est le simulacre du lointain »⁵⁸, on constate que Bellanger omet de mentionner ce mot tout au long des *Trois ans de promenades* (ce qui ne signifie pas qu'il n'y en a pas eu une). Ainsi, même si ses guides et compagnons en ont fait usage, sa propre conception de l'organisation de l'espace de l'Europe de l'Est nous semble tellement désorganisée que celui-ci tient plutôt de l'illusion, de l'onirique, du surréalisme.

Cela n'exclut nullement l'existence de certains traits qui caractériseraient, à ses yeux, les peuples situés dans ces contrées, qui les rapprochent des Orientaux, comme le désir ou la sensualité, qui caractérisent l'imaginaire oriental généralement admis chez la plupart des auteurs. Todorova sera des premiers critiques à parler ouvertement de ce sensualisme en acquiesçant sa nuance de sexualité :

Il [l'Orient] proposait une somptueuse garde-robe et une nudité encore plus extravagante. Il y a avait un lien explicite entre l'Orient et le féminin ; on a pu

⁵⁵ Pierre Loti, « *Suprêmes visions d'Orient* », in *Voyages*, Paris, Calmann Lévy, 1923, p. 1406 et 1450.

⁵⁶ Dolores Toma, *Pierre Loti. Le voyage, entre la féerie et le néant*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2008, p. 72.

⁵⁷ F. Affergan, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

dire que les discours orientalistes impliquent une théorie de la sexualité et de la sensualité sous le masque d'une théorie de l'ascétisme⁵⁹.

Ces traits sont bien valables chez Bellanger, si l'on pense par exemple à la scène des femmes de Transylvanie qui marchaient les pieds nus en plein hiver, accompagnées d'un homme qui se porte témoin et bénéficiaire directe de ce spectacle de sensualité :

Elles marchaient au milieu de la neige comme elles eussent marché dans un salon couvert d'un tapis, causant, riant, sautant d'un pied sur l'autre, et paraissant défier les rigueurs de la saison. Il fallait donc qu'un sang bien chaud coulât dans leurs veines ⁶⁰ !

Et, bien sûr, n'oublions pas la séquence des filles de chambre de Tomornik, localité qu'il situe en Hongrie – nouvelle une preuve que la Hongrie est, elle aussi, imprégnée pour Bellanger de cette sensualité orientale –, qui essayent de manière très directe d'offrir leurs services sexuels. Précisons que Bellanger donne un poids considérable à cette scène, l'une des quatre qu'il raconte dans son itinéraire entre Pest et Timișoara, c'est-à-dire avant l'entrée en terre transylvano-valaque. Car, placée précisément en tête du chapitre X, cette scène bénéficie d'une double préparation : la citation d'un classique : « Boileau a dit quelque part : „Le vrai peut quelquefois n'être pas vraisemblable”, et Boileau avait raison. Rien de plus exact, aujourd'hui surtout. Je n'oublierai jamais, à cet égard, l'incroyable aventure dont nous fûmes les héros, dans le petit village de Tomornik »⁶¹, et l'intervention de l'auteur, qui supplie le lecteur d'être indulgent en lui pardonnant « la légèreté des détails »⁶². Ainsi, les filles hongroises étaient prêtes à prester d'autres services au-delà de ce que prévoyait leur « fiche de poste ».

Toutefois, à la stupéfaction du lecteur désireux de se délecter d'une délicieuse scène indécente au milieu d'un récit de voyage, cette affaire est étonnamment tranchée en deux temps trois mouvements par un refus – apparemment ridicule – de la part du jeune protagoniste. Puis, pour souligner le caractère général de cette habitude qui évoque le sensualisme oriental, Bellanger affirme que cette

⁵⁹ M. Todorova, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

⁶⁰ S. Bellanger, *Trois ans de promenades*, t. II, p. 333.

⁶¹ *Idem*, p. 311.

⁶² *Ibid.*

histoire s'est répétée chaque fois qu'ils ont logé dans une auberge de Hongrie, et appréciée, toujours de manière générale,

la richesse de formes dont ces jeunes femmes sont pourvues ; [...] leur fraîcheur, leur élégance même et leur piquante... corruption, car, il faut bien le dire, elles sont piquantes et naïves jusques au milieu du vice⁶³.

Revenant au topos de la pauvreté, une ressemblance encore plus forte aux descriptions de Ségur montre cependant celle que notre voyageur fait des villages transylvains :

Les Valaques⁶⁴, enfin, se cachent sous des toits de chaume ou de paille qui, entassés les uns sur les autres, donnent à leurs villages l'aspect de ces bourgades que les Anglais nomment *rotten-boroughs*, c'est-à-dire *bourgs pourris*⁶⁵.

Son tableau s'achève sur l'intérieur d'une pareille chaumière, où tout un bétail comprenant un bouc, deux porcs et une vache, plus une douzaine de volailles côtoient les pauvres habitants accroupis autour d'un feu « pétillant [...] de bouse de vache desséchée »⁶⁶, ce qui arrache sa remarque hyperbolique : « Jamais la hutte d'un Mosquitos ou d'un Namaquois n'offrit rien de plus sauvage et de plus révoltant »⁶⁷.

En fait, c'est surtout la pauvreté ou le retard du développement économique qui distingue, aux yeux de nos voyageurs français, cette partie de l'Europe de sa contrepartie occidentale. Mais comme ces caractéristiques ne sont point compatibles avec le luxe des grandes villes de l'Orient, et que ni dans la description de Pest ou des localités du Banat serbe on ne retrouve aucun élément d'opulence, c'est pour cela qu'on aurait tort à dire que la Pologne ou la Hongrie se trouvaient en Orient, tandis qu'elles étaient situées dans l'Europe de l'Est. Ni même en Transylvanie, bien qu'on soit à la frontière de l'Autriche avec l'Empire ottoman et que cette province est restée plus longtemps sous domination ottomane, le voyageur ne peut encore prétendre être en Orient.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 316.

⁶⁴ Bellanger utilise toujours ce nom pour parler des Transylvaniens, qu'il ne distingue pas des Valaques, et avec raison.

⁶⁵ S. Bellanger, *Trois ans de promenades*, t. II, p. 329–330.

⁶⁶ *Idem*, p. 330.

⁶⁷ *Idem*, p. 331.

La comparaison avec les Mosquitos et les Namaquois ne doit d'ailleurs pas surprendre autant. D'une part, comme ces deux populations exotiques étaient récemment découvertes et faisaient l'objet de quantité d'articles dans les « magasins pittoresques » à l'époque de Bellanger, leur évocation était d'autant plus parlante. T. Todorov souligne de son côté que « dans les phases précoces de la découverte de l'Autre [oriental/européen], on projette sur les êtres nouvellement découverts des images et des idées concernant d'autres populations lointaines »⁶⁸. C'est toujours lui qui nous édifie sur l'emplacement de cette évocation de l'Africain ou du Sud-Américain lors de la première description que Bellanger dresse à une chaumière de Transylvanie : « Le choc initial est aussi unique. Les rencontres ultérieures de l'Autre n'atteindront jamais plus une telle intensité que celle de la rencontre initiale »⁶⁹.

Une prochaine référence à l'Orient ne concerne plus les limites ou la localisation ; cette fois-ci il s'agit de l'adhésion à un espace culturel. Ainsi, Bellanger choisit de parler à Timișoara des bains turcs. S'il ne donne aucun autre argument en faveur de l'appartenance de cette ville à un espace géographique oriental, et comme la province du Banat appartenait à l'Empire autrichien, il est clair que cette référence veut plutôt marquer l'exotisme de ces bains. En plus, le narrateur, après les avoir appelés « turcs », insiste sur leur non-conformité, comme s'il s'agissait d'un Orient de seconde main⁷⁰ : « Ces bains viennent des Turcs [...], mais ils sont loin de valoir ceux de Constantinople »⁷¹. Effectivement, on constate que l'influence de la culture ottomane est conçue comme une carte à courbes de niveau, où les cercles concentriques radient d'une intensité plus ou moins importante selon leur proximité avec le noyau, qui se trouve à Constantinople. On pourrait dire ainsi que Bucarest est plus orientalisé que Timișoara, ce qui est juste si l'on considère que cette dernière avait subi elle aussi l'occupation ottomane, mais cette domination avait duré beaucoup moins et s'était éteinte il y avait plus d'un siècle.

Ainsi, cette ville est une « halte inévitable »⁷² qu'on rencontre aussi, par exemple, chez le couple Charles-Frédéric et Christine Reinhard⁷³, venus en

⁶⁸ Tzvetan Todorov, *La conquête de l'Amérique. La question de l'autre*, Paris, Seuil, 1982, p. 13.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ Voir aussi en contrepartie la conception de « l'arriération balkanique et un statut de seconde classe au sein de la nouvelle Europe » tel qu'est conçu l'espace balkanique à partir du XX^e siècle, in M. Todorova, *op. cit.*, p. 230.

⁷¹ S. Bellanger, *Trois ans de promenades*, t. II, p. 327-328.

⁷² Adrien Pasquali, *Le tour des horizons*, Paris, Klincksieck, 1994, p. 48.

⁷³ Voir Christine Reinhard, *Une femme de diplomate. Lettres de Madame Reinhard à sa mère*,

Moldavie en 1806 pour que ce premier occupe le poste de vice-consul. Mais, en même temps, soit par « subversion »⁷⁴, soit par sa fidélité à rapporter toujours la vérité de ce que le hasard lui a préparé, Bellanger néglige la belle ville de Sibiu, ancienne capitale des Saxons, ne prend aucune des deux routes habituelles de Transylvanie à Bucarest (soit par Turnu-Roșu, suivant la Vallée de l'Olt, soit par la Vallée du Teleajen)⁷⁵ et, même à Timișoara, évite de parler des objectifs incontournables comme l'imposante fortification ou la cathédrale baroque. En échange, il veut marquer sa pénétration dans le monde oriental en parlant des ... bains turcs ! Ainsi, on peut considérer que, dans cette situation, le silence est parlant.

Après la Transylvanie, à laquelle il dédie environ vingt pages sans pourtant y inclure un moindre élément qui renvoie à un espace « oriental », une nouvelle frontière de cet espace morganatique du levant prend contour : la frontière entre l'Empire autrichien et la Valachie, frontière située à Timișu de Sus. Cette fois-ci, il s'agit d'une double barrière. Laissant de côté la délimitation géographique, l'écrivain transgresse une barrière psychologique selon laquelle il allait mettre les pieds sur « la terre classique de la peste noire »⁷⁶. Du point de vue sanitaire, pour les pays occidentaux l'Empire Ottoman se trouvait dans ce qu'on appellerait aujourd'hui « la zone rouge ». C'était un espace qui avait longtemps été tenu responsable pour la provenance de la peste en Occident et où, à vrai dire, les conditions sanitaires plus précaires ont favorisé sa perpétuation plus longtemps pendant le XIX^e siècle. Cela signifiait que tout voyageur arrivant des Principautés Danubiennes devait subir une quarantaine avant de recevoir libre passage dans l'Empire Autrichien et subséquemment. L'angoisse de cette privation hante déjà le jeune voyageur au moment où il passe la douane de Timișul de Sus :

Les barrières de la douane se levèrent enfin sur l'ordre du directeur. Nous franchîmes la redoutable grille du lazaret. Dès ce moment [...], bien que nous n'eussions encore fait qu'un pas, il nous eût été impossible de rentrer à la Têmesche sans subir une quarantaine de huit jours. Entre la grille et nous il y avait désormais tout un monde.

1798–1815, éd. Marie Maximilienne Antoinette Louise Reinhard, Paris, Alphonse Picard et fils, 1900, et aussi N. Diaconiuc, « *Une femme de diplomate* », p. 237–249.

⁷⁴ A. Pasquali, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

⁷⁵ Voir Nestor Urechia, *Drumul Brașovului*, Bucarest, Institut d'Arts Graphiques Carol Göbl, 1913, p. 4–7.

⁷⁶ S. Bellanger, *Trois ans de promenades*, t. II, p. 353.

On ne pouvait nous toucher sans danger, accepter même notre argent sans le faire préalablement passer dans le vinaigre. On nous poussa la grille sur le dos, comme on l'eût fait sur de malheureux parias, et nous nous éloignâmes⁷⁷.

Voici, donc, un bel exemple où le vide épistémologique agit de sorte que le temps se mêle à l'espace et que chacun semble absorber l'autre⁷⁸. Là, à la douane, sans qu'il y ait une distance de plus d'un pas entre les deux « mondes », le décalage culturel entre l'Occident et l'Orient (qui est en fait un décalage plutôt temporel, puisque l'Orient a un autre rythme de développement) se voit multiplié à l'infini, et c'est toujours là que la notion de citoyen, de naissance, d'appartenance ne compte plus, du moment où l'espace enferme le voyageur et le rend « paria ». La peur de ce démon appelé « la peste noire » donne alors naissance à un véritable rituel d'exorcisation issu de la désinfection par trempage dans le vinaigre.

Pendant, on remarque combien actuel est le passage, et que le même sentiment de peur se cache derrière la rigueur des règles sanitaires imposées de nos jours, à l'époque du Covid-19. Bellanger donne la mesure de la vigilance des autorités autrichiennes par l'anecdote suivante, où la sévérité va jusqu'à l'auto-dénonce :

Un inspecteur de la douane causait avec un nouvel arrivé. Oubliant que ce voyageur venait d'Orient, il mit la main dans sa tabatière ; mais tout à coup faisant réflexion, il se reconnut lui-même en flagrant délit et se constitua au lazaret pour huit jours⁷⁹.

Sa deuxième destination, Bucarest, vers laquelle il se dirige maintenant le cœur resserré, semble l'inspirer plus que ne l'avait fait la capitale autrichienne. Cette fois-ci, il est plus enthousiaste et plus rêveur car il attend particulièrement l'arrivée dans la petite ville Câmpina, située dans la Plaine valaque, sachant que de là jusqu'à la capitale il n'y aurait aucun danger. Mais cette attente s'avère si pesante, que le personnage du jeune voyageur est très déçu quand, épuisé, il réalise que la distance qui les sépare est considérablement plus grande qu'il ne l'avait escompté et qu'il fallait d'abord atteindre l'obscur halte de Mickincka⁸⁰.

⁷⁷ *Idem*, p. 353–354.

⁷⁸ Pour le binôme espace-temps, voir aussi F. Affergan, *op. cit.*, p. 28–29.

⁷⁹ S. Bellanger, *Trois ans de promenades*, t. II, p. 354.

⁸⁰ Toponyme non-identifié.

Ainsi, il tombe sous les charmes de cette véritable *fata Morgana*⁸¹, qui ne se laisse pas gagner si facilement, subit un choc hypothermique et perd sa connaissance, au point de trépasser. Il lui faudra l'intervention de tout son équipage moldo-valaque pour reprendre ses sens, et encore plus de présence d'esprit pour réaliser que cette dernière halte avant Bucarest possède, à la fois, les délices, mais aussi la perfidie d'une « oasis dans le désert »⁸². Les remarques qu'il fait une fois arrivé dans cette ville dévoilent l'enthousiasme réprimé si habilement pendant plus de cent pages : « Le soir même nous couchâmes à Kimpina ; Kimpina, la ville de nos désirs ; Kimpina, vedette de la métropole »⁸³. Aussi bien la triple répétition qui donne un effet de musicalité bénigne, que l'utilisation du nom « vedette », qui à l'époque n'était pas tellement lié aux arts du spectacle, signifiant tout simplement « avant-poste », contribuent à un certain conformisme de Bellanger pour le *happy-end*, autre halte non obligatoire mais très recommandable dans le récit de voyage romantique. Ainsi, « il se laisse porter par son imagination dans les déserts d'Arabie »⁸⁴, mais la référence à une simple « oasis » laisse entendre qu'au bout de ce désert représenté par le chemin entre Câmpina et Bucarest il y aura une véritable Mecque où il va se régaler :

Nous la saluâmes comme une oasis dans le désert. Tout était en rumeur dans la vaste cour du caravansérail au milieu duquel nous fûmes introduits. On allait, on venait, on s'entretenait à voix basse, à voix haute, à mi-voix. C'était, chez les uns, une curiosité instinctive, chez les autres un intérêt véritable⁸⁵.

L'organisation du type auberge orientale du côté de laquelle se rangent ensemble des hommes et leur bétail, ainsi que le brouhaha et la loquacité des gens qui s'y trouvent sont des composants indubitables d'un imaginaire oriental.

Mais ce n'est que dans *Le Kéroutza* que l'impression d'être enfin arrivé en Orient s'exprime pleinement, de sorte qu'on dirait plutôt un « petit Istanbul » au lieu de ce qu'on appelle aujourd'hui « petit Paris ». Bellanger appelle les

⁸¹ Voir N. Diaconiuc, « Du stéréotype à l'interculturalité », p. 53.

⁸² S. Bellanger, *Trois ans de promenades*, t. II, p. 414.

⁸³ *Idem*, p. 413-414.

⁸⁴ N. Diaconiuc, « Du stéréotype à l'interculturalité », p. 53.

⁸⁵ S. Bellanger, *Trois ans de promenades*, t. II, p. 414.

habitants de cette ville « Orientaux »⁸⁶, il compte le « roman »⁸⁷ parmi les « langues d'Orient »⁸⁸ et assimile certains usages, tels celui du *baçşış* à la culture moldo-valaque. Ou bien, suivant le même discours orientaliste dévalorisant, il attribue certains retards de civilisation à l'appartenance à l'Orient : « En Orient, ne se fait pas qui veut blanchir à son goût, et repasser ! »⁸⁹.

Soulignons encore que le déplacement vers cet « Orient » présentait maints périls pour le voyageur du XIX^e siècle. Dans la première partie du siècle, donc avant la création des premiers chemins de fer et l'introduction des bateaux à vapeur, les routes terrestres étaient le moyen de transport le plus sûr, mais présentaient divers périls, comme : les bandits, les bêtes sauvages ou les intempéries du climat, et leur mauvais état rendait le déplacement parfois très difficile. Ajoutons à cela le manque ou l'état précaire des services d'hospitalité : les auberges étaient très rares et, comme on le verra, le logement qu'elles offraient était pénible ; ou bien, c'était très souvent sous le ciel ouvert ou dans une tente que les voyageurs devaient dormir. La fatigue, le gel, les maladies, et les dépenses très élevées (y compris les pourboires qu'il fallait payer) complétaient ce triste tableau du voyageur vers l'Est de l'Europe. D'ailleurs, on sait que les grands voyages en Orient ont coûté très cher : « Chateaubriand [dépense] près de cinquante mille francs ; Lamartine dépensera le double pour la somptueuse expédition qu'il organise entre 1832–1833 »⁹⁰.

Bellanger jouit pourtant de plusieurs atouts pendant son expédition. D'abord, on sait qu'il bénéficie de l'aide financier de son père et surtout d'une mystérieuse dame B*** H*** dont on parle dans la scène des lettres qu'on lui remet à Vienne. Puis, il est accompagné par M. G*** tout au long de l'itinéraire de Vienne à Bucarest et demeure dans sa maison à Bucarest pendant les premiers mois de son séjour. Troisièmement, il parlera assez d'une intégration assez rapide au sein d'une communauté d'expatriés français habitant à Bucarest, qu'il appellera en « Franco-Valaques »⁹¹.

Concentrons-nous sur son arrivée à Bucarest. Comme pour chaque accueil, celui-ci aussi doit être compris dans un contexte plus large : les émotions

⁸⁶ S. Bellanger, *Le Kéroutza*, t. I, p. 14.

⁸⁷ *Idem*, p. 299. La même hésitation entre « roumain », « roman » et même « rouman » existe chez J. A. Vaillant, dont l'ouvrage dédié aux Pays Roumains porte le titre *La Romanie*.

⁸⁸ S. Bellanger, *Le Kéroutza*, t. I, p. 299.

⁸⁹ *Idem*, p. 90.

⁹⁰ Jean-Claude Berchet, *Le voyage en Orient. Anthologie des voyageurs français dans le Levant au XIX^e siècle*, Paris, Bouquins/Robert Laffont, 1985, p. 5.

⁹¹ S. Bellanger, *Le Kéroutza*, t. I, p. 147.

éveillées par la vue du nouveau décor sont toujours mêlées du bagage affectif des scènes précédentes. Ainsi, d'une part, l'arrivée dans la capitale est marquée par l'enthousiasme du débarquement, la vitesse imprimée par le traîneau qui volait pratiquement au-dessus de la neige, et par les attentes créées par le cri joyeux du « vieux Popobankiala »⁹² : « *Boukouresquié !* ». Mais tout cela va pâlir face à un paysage désolant qui règne à la porte de la ville. La barrière de la ville, « formée d'une longue poutrelle de bois brut »⁹³ se soulevant de la haie mouillée par le brouillard, le forum boueux qui « offrait pour le moment le fort peu gracieux aspect d'un champ de foire sur lequel se sont, pendant quelques heures, ébattues deux ou trois mille bêtes à cornes »⁹⁴, où le traîneau de Bellanger reste embourbé ; l'inspection du véhicule et l'interrogatoire à la fin duquel ils durent payer leur pot-de-vin aux miliciens pour avoir libre passage ; le « *Pô de Mogochoiã* »⁹⁵, lui aussi boueux, où il était « impossible, dans cette grande artère, de faire un pas à pied sec », la multitude de véhicules attelés qui « se croisaient avec une vitesse effrayante, sans se froisser »⁹⁶ – toutes, ensemble, créent un véritable choc culturel au voyageur impatient de voir la ville de sa destination.

Enfin, voici la description de la maison de G*** : appelée avec insistance « bicoque » et comparée à « une pauvre femme qui cherche à voiler sa misère sous un vieux et sordide manteau, cette maison cachait ses lézardes et son triste aspect sous un badigeon moins blanc que sale »⁹⁷. Mais malgré l'aspect malpropre et sa désolation extérieure, la maison abrite des personnages qui éveillent une gamme variée d'émotions chez le nouvel arrivé. D'une part, c'est l'hospitalité de Mme G***, qui apporta le souper et qui présenta Stanislas aux autres invités français qu'elle avait réunis ce soir-là. Puis, l'admiration pour une autre locataire de la maison, « la première actrice du théâtre valaque »⁹⁸. Autant les nombreuses auberges où il loge entre Paris et Bucarest, que cette maison où il sera accueilli pendant son séjour en Valachie, s'inscrivent dans la série des lieux d'hospitalité, étapes obligées dans tous les récits de voyage.

⁹² *Idem*, p. 2. L'évocation de ce personnage, présenté initialement dans *Trois ans de promenades*, est en incohérence avec l'ouvrage-ci. À la fin de *Trois ans de promenades*, Popobankiala avait définitivement pris congé de l'équipage qui allait en direction de Bucarest, dans une scène touchante.

⁹³ *Idem*, p. 2.

⁹⁴ *Idem*, p. 3.

⁹⁵ *Idem*, p. 7. Aujourd'hui, Calea Victoriei.

⁹⁶ *Idem*, p. 8.

⁹⁷ *Idem*, p. 9.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.* On n'a pas pu identifier le personnage.

Ajoutons à tout cela que dans cette maison il rencontre quelques compatriotes français qui étaient venus l'accueillir le soir même de son arrivée, et qui lui resteront à ses côtés tout au long de son séjour. Les émotions et les larmes de ces compatriotes dans la scène de leur rencontre donnent au passage une note générale larmoyante, pathétique, mais souligne le patriotisme de l'auteur et le sentiment d'une appartenance qui le reconforte, par opposition à l'effroi d'une altérité qui anguisse⁹⁹ éprouvé par d'autres voyageurs moins fortunés :

Ils nous firent un accueil des plus affectueux. [...] Quand on arrive du pays natal, quand on a franchi huit cents lieues, et qu'au bout de cette longue route on rencontre des compatriotes, que de choses on doit avoir à leur dire, que de nouvelles à leur raconter !

« Place au feu ! place à table ! s'écriaient-ils avec enthousiasme. Et Paris ? et Sens ? et Meaux ? et la France ? reprenaient-ils ensuite d'une même voix. »

Et en prononçant ce mot magique : la France ! tous ils essuyaient une larme, ils nous pressaient les mains, ils nous regardaient, nous souriaient... *intentique ora tenebant* !

« Parlez-nous de nos amis, de nos parents, de notre grande et belle capitale ? disaient-ils à la fois.

Dans le septième chapitre de cet ouvrage, Bellanger traite de deux thèmes connexes, qui renvoient tous les deux à une autre théorie sur l'Orient, beaucoup débattue au XVIII^e siècle : le despotisme¹⁰⁰. D'une part, il s'agit du pouvoir du voïévode, mais aussi des instances de justice valaque, d'infliger des peines à leurs sujets, selon leur propre goût et sans aucune restriction ; d'autre part, il s'agit de la nature de ces peines, qui tient le plus souvent des châtiments corporels de toute sorte. Témoignant d'un sang-froid extraordinaire, à la limite du sadisme, le narrateur explique en détail quelques châtiments des plus douloureux et donne même des exemples de la créativité des hospodars à cet égard, précisant toutefois que la chute des Phanariotes avait mis fin à ces pratiques barbares :

Le tyran inventait lui-même de nouveaux, de plus douloureux châtiments pour assouvir les sanguinaires appétits de son cœur. Que lui importaient les cris, les prières, les protestations de ses victimes ! Plus la proie qu'il dévore palpite et gémit, plus le tigre éprouve de plaisir.

⁹⁹ F. Affergan, *op. cit.*, p. 27-28.

¹⁰⁰ Voir J. Cl. Berchet, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

C'est qu'en effet les woïwodes, fanariotes ou autres, ne punissaient pas dans l'unique but de venger la société outragée : comme Néron, comme Caligula, comme Commode, ils aimaient à jouir d'un supplice dont l'horreur pouvait seule encore irriter en eux quelque fibre. Ils analysaient, si je puis me servir du mot, la torture, et savouraient les cris de la douleur ! ...¹⁰¹

Ainsi, Bellanger énumère des châtiments comme : enfermer le prévenu dans une moule de pierre et le tenir immobile jusqu'à ce qu'il meure, lui arracher les paupières, faire coudre les vêtements sur la peau, l'enterrer jusqu'au cou et jouer à la boulle avec sa tête.

En prenant tout cela en compte, nous pensons que la « fin » de son itinéraire, s'il y en a une, serait justement l'arrivée à un lieu où il soit accueilli, qu'il puisse appeler sien. La ville de Bucarest répond justement à ce besoin de se fixer, de se sentir à l'aise. Ainsi, les premières pages du *Kéroutza*, où il fait son entrée dans la capitale valaque, seraient aussi le moment où son itinéraire touche à sa fin.

Découvrant à Bucarest un entourage composé presque exclusivement de Français, et grâce à la francisation de la société bucarestoise qui était en plein essor à l'époque, Bellanger se croit, des fois, à Paris. Ainsi, il s'avère un véritable illusionniste en ce qui concerne la manipulation de l'espace ; il fait la capitale française venir à Bucarest :

Au bout d'une heure, rentrée générale au salon. De jeunes et belles femmes, et en grand nombre, en occupaient le pourtour. Vêtues à la française, assises à la française, causant, riant, faisant d'étourdissantes petites mines, toujours à la française, elles rivalisaient d'éclat, d'élégance, de bon goût, de séduction. On eût dit, sans risquer beaucoup la métaphore, d'une corbeille de fleurs sur laquelle vient de s'abattre un essaim d'abeilles bourdonnant – à la française. Je me crus à Paris. Le salon me parut meublé avec un luxe splendide¹⁰².

Pour conclure, il faudrait se rendre compte, avec Todorova, que le besoin d'utiliser cet « Orient imaginé » est issu du « refuge contre l'aliénation causée par l'industrialisation rapide », et sert aussi de « métaphore de l'interdit »¹⁰³. Si l'on essaye d'appliquer ces deux notions à l'œuvre de Bellanger, on constate deux

¹⁰¹ S. Bellanger, *Le Kéroutza*, t. I, p. 180–181.

¹⁰² *Idem*, p. 393–394.

¹⁰³ M. Todorova, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

choses. D'abord, Bellanger ne se plaint ni s'élève nulle part contre le processus industriel – au contraire, il déplore la faible industrialisation de la Moldo-Valachie. Cela nous fait songer que, par symétrie, ni l'image ou la convoitise de l'Orient ne sont pas très prononcées chez lui. Deuxièmement, on dispose de très peu d'informations sur sa vie privée pour comprendre s'il était tellement sujet aux interdictions ; on soupçonne que, hormis les embarras matériels, il n'y en avait pas ou il n'y avait que très peu. Cela se constitue dans un deuxième argument pour lequel nous pensons que son désir de construire un imaginaire de l'Orient était assez faible ou incohérent, ou que nous disposons de très peu d'informations qui nous autorisent à sentir certaines subtilités de cet imaginaire qui auraient affaire à son propre vécu.

Ainsi, plutôt qu'une image cohérente, l'Orient de ce jeune écrivain français tient plutôt du niveau des rêveries et si « le monde [...] commence là où nous ne pouvons pas être, même en imagination »¹⁰⁴ – pour paraphraser l'expression d'H. Bianciotti –, c'est de même que l'Orient de Bellanger commence là où finit son voyage et commencent ses rêveries.

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¹⁰⁴ Hector Bianciotti, *Sans la miséricorde du Christ*, Paris, Gallimard, 1985, p. 40.

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L'OUEST REGARDE L'EST. LA CONVENTION DU VOYAGEUR ÉTRANGER DANS LA LITTÉRATURE ROUMAINE D'HIER ET D'AUJOURD'HUI

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East Looks West. The Topos of the Foreign Traveler in Romanian Classic and Contemporary Literature

Abstract: Starting from the assumption that, since the 19th century, the topic of the foreign traveler has acquired a particular relevance in Romanian literature, the present article aims to analyze several fictional works that highlight the complex relationship between Romanians' Eastern legacy and their urge to embrace the model offered by Western civilization. Around 1848, when the intellectuals from the Principalities were engaged in a sustained effort to modernize Romanian society, Vasile Alecsandri published *Balta Albă*, a short story that humorously depicts the gallery of contrasts characteristic of Moldavian and Wallachian societies, seen through a French traveler's eyes. Almost a century later, Mihail Sadoveanu brings back to the forefront the topic of the Western traveler in two of his interwar masterpieces: *Zodia cancerului* (1929) and *Noaptea de Sânziene* (1934), while in the second half of the 20th century, Maria Luiza Cristescu relocates it in a sophisticated parabolic novel called *Privilegiu* (1987). The present article will primarily explore the ways in which these fictional representations manage to soften and nuance the tensions raised by inflexible ideological positions.

Keywords: foreign traveler; Eastern legacy; memory; European civilization; 19th century.

Le motif de l'étranger a acquis, depuis le XIXe siècle, une pertinence particulière dans le paysage de la jeune littérature roumaine, à une époque où les élites des Principautés étaient engagées dans un effort soutenu pour moderniser

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la société roumaine, pour construire les premières institutions culturelles et, simultanément, quelques repères identitaires capables de définir la spécificité nationale. Thématisée d'abord dans les journaux de voyage, puis même dans des œuvres de fiction, la confrontation avec l'altérité représente, à l'aube de la culture roumaine moderne, un exercice essentiel pour « ceux qui ont ouvert la voie », facilitant la cristallisation du discours sur l'identité collective et enfin conduisant à une action efficace, matérialisée dans la reprise du modèle offert par la civilisation occidentale (notamment française). Si jusqu'à la fin du XVIIe siècle, l'influence de la culture grecque avait été dominante dans les pays roumains, dans les premières décennies du siècle romantique, elle sera progressivement concurrencée par la culture française, de plus en plus pregnante vers le milieu du siècle, marqué – comme on le sait – par la Révolution roumaine de 1848.

D'autre part, il ne faut pas oublier qu'au XIXe siècle, la Valachie et la Moldavie étaient perçues, du point de vue des voyageurs arrivant de l'Ouest, comme appartenant plutôt à l'Est (ou, au mieux, comme un « seuil » ou un « pont » entre l'Ouest et l'Est). Il suffit de rappeler le célèbre verdict de Raymond Poincaré concernant la localisation des principautés roumaines aux « Portes de l'Orient ». Aussi schématique que puisse nous paraître aujourd'hui cette caractérisation (devenue au fil du temps une sorte de stéréotype identitaire), elle a le mérite de mettre clairement en évidence le statut liminal, « frontalier », de la civilisation roumaine, au-delà de sa simple localisation géographique ou géopolitique. Après tout, cette polarisation a jalonné, depuis le début de l'époque moderne, à la fois l'évolution de la culture roumaine et la perpétuation de quelques mentalités spécifiques.

Ceci est démontré, entre autres, par l'un des premiers récits de voyage de notre littérature, appartenant à Dinicu Golescu (*Însemnare a călătoriei mele, făcută la anul 1824, 1825, 1826*)¹. Représentant des boyards/ aristocraties locales (il a atteint le rang de Grand Logothète de Valachie), mais aussi érudit aux vues illuministes, convaincu que la régénération morale et sociale du pays n'est possible que par la culturalisation, Golescu propose, en fait, un programme politique et culturel déguisé en mémoire de voyage. De retour au pays après son voyage en Occident, le grand boyard valaque inventorie, consciencieusement et avec enthousiasme, comme dans un rapport, tous les aspects qui pouvaient servir de modèles : écoles, hôpitaux, musées, moyens de transport, théâtres, bibliothèques, etc. Suite à la comparaison, on voit clairement l'antithèse entre

¹ Dinicu Golescu, *Scrieri*, ediție de Mircea Anghelescu, București, Editura Minerva, 1990.

le monde de chez soi (assimilé à l'Orient et coupable de toutes ses coutumes) et le monde de l'Europe occidentale, investi – comme l'a remarqué Mircea Angheliescu – avec les avantages d'une société utopique². La dichotomie Orient/ Occident est désormais figée dans ses données essentielles : le premier (l'Orient) rassemble une série de connotations négatives : il est vicieux, ritualiste, fataliste, un espace d'exhibition de faste et de luxe éblouissant, dans l'indifférence totale des puissants envers la pauvreté de ses sujets ; le deuxième terme de la comparaison répond à tous les attributs d'un modèle digne d'être suivi : il est actif, énergique, rationnel, individualiste, constructif et pratique. Ainsi, aussi « levantins », « orientaux » ou

« balkaniques » qu'ils aient pu paraître aux voyageurs occidentaux au début de l'époque moderne, les intellectuels roumains (ou du moins les plus « éclairés » d'entre eux) regardaient avec confiance vers l'Occident, conscients – comme le fait Dinicu Golescu – de leur double statut liminal (aux portes de l'Orient et au carrefour entre le monde antique et le monde moderne).

Il n'est donc pas surprenant que cette problématique revienne périodiquement dans l'actualité, se révélant aussi séduisante qu'obsessionnelle, générant souvent des polémiques et des complexes collectifs, mais prouvant – presque à chaque fois – sa vitalité et sa pertinence dans une perspective à long terme.

Un siècle après Dinicu Golescu, dans *Istoria civilizației române moderne*³, E. Lovinescu, à son tour, plaidait pour le modèle européen, considérant la période 1804–1866 comme cruciale pour la régénération politique et sociale des pays roumains. La révolution de 1848 constitue, selon lui, le véritable point de départ du libéralisme autochtone, à travers l'adoption et l'adaptation du modèle occidental. En d'autres termes, le changement du cycle d'évolution du pays se serait produit vers le milieu du XIXe siècle à la suite d'une synchronisation avec les pays européens avancés : « Les civilisations antiques sont apparues en Orient ; d'où : *ex oriente lux* ! [...] Dans notre siècle et à notre place, la lumière vient de l'Occident : *ex occidente lux* ! Le progrès ne peut signifier pour nous que la fertilisation du fonds national par l'élément créatif de l'idéologie occidentale »⁴.

De toute évidence, pour la critique de *Sburătorul*, cette déclaration tranchante avait avant tout un enjeu polémique, dans le contexte de la confrontation entre

² Mircea Angheliescu, *Lâna de aur. Călătorii și călătoriile în literatura română*, București, Cartea Românească, 2015, p. 25.

³ E. Lovinescu, *Istoria civilizației române moderne*. Ediție și studiu introductiv de Z. Ornea, București, Editura Minerva, 1997.

⁴ *Idem*, p. 13. La traduction en français nous appartient.

modernisme et traditionalisme, à une époque de l'entre-deux-guerres où l'auteur de *L'histoire de la civilisation roumaine* s'efforçait de démontrer minutieusement les principaux arguments des traditionalistes – des poporanistes et des adeptes de la revue *Sămănătorul* – en révélant la faiblesse foncière.

En revenant à la période de la révolution, on constate aisément une préoccupation constante des écrivains roumains de cette période pour la problématique de l'espace, qui, loin de se limiter au genre des mémoires de voyage, a des répercussions sur la fiction, qu'il s'agisse des physiologies très populaires jusqu'aux alentours de 1840, des nouvelles ou des romans. Liviu Papadima attribue cette prédilection au fait que la thématique en discussion façonne fondamentalement les relations entre « Nous » et « Les Autres », encourageant les comparaisons, relativisant les vérités absolues et favorisant les renversements de perspective :

« Le voyage met en avant tout un paradigme conceptuel, englobant l'idée de soi et de l'autre, d'identité et d'altérité, de distance et de proximité, de centre et de périphérie, de naturel et d'anormal. Les polarités spatiales ordonnatrices commencent maintenant à interférer avec les polarités temporelles, interférences investies d'une pertinence axiologique, comme l'Occident et l'Orient, le nouveau et l'ancien, la civilisation et la barbarie [...] La couleur locale, le génie du lieu, l'exotisme, le pittoresque, l'inclination marquée vers le descriptivisme visuel, le régionalisme si fortement manifesté dans la prose de l'époque, du style à la problématique [...], le perspectivisme, les modifications de l'image en fonction de l'angle de perception sont parmi les thèmes et les stratégies favoris des prosateurs de l'époque, servant souvent de ponts entre les options esthétiques et idéologiques ».⁵

Dans le contexte des transformations rapides de l'après-guerre, un exercice très passionnant est la défamiliarisation du familier, sa transposition dans une nouvelle perspective, par la médiation de la convention de « l'étranger ». Nous avons affaire à un topos vénérable, répandu en Europe au siècle des Lumières et même plus tôt, si l'on prend en compte une œuvre du XVII^e siècle, antérieure donc aux *Lettres Persanes* de Montesquieu, intitulée *L'Esploratore turco e le di lui relazioni segrete alla Porta ottomana scoperte in Parigi nel regno di Luiggi il Grande. Tradotte dall'arabo in italiano da Gian Paolo Marana*.

⁵ Liviu Papadima, *Literatură și comunicare. Relația autor-cititor în proza pașoptistă și postpașoptistă*, Iași, Editura Polirom, 1999, p. 119–120. La traduction en français nous appartient.

Progressivement, le perspectivisme a acquis une couleur locale plus vive dans la culture roumaine, comme ailleurs dans l'Europe romantique, les révolutionnaires se révélant un peu plus pragmatiques que leurs prédécesseurs, plus attentifs aux particularités et, enfin et surtout, à la façon dont la civilisation roumaine apparaît aux yeux de « l'autre ». En un mot, ils ne méprisent nullement les bienfaits du « trafic d'images »⁶, destiné à produire des conséquences importantes non seulement sur le plan culturel, mais aussi sur le plan politique.

Un exemple édifiant dans ce sens est le récit *Balta Albă* de Vasile Alecsandri, un exercice imagologique ingénieux et, en même temps, un « produit » destiné au public étranger (puisque quelques années après sa publication en roumain, dans *Calendarul pentru români* d'Asachi, l'auteur a réédité son esquisse en français, dans les pages du magazine *Illustration*, selon toute vraisemblance dans sa propre traduction). La première version date de 1847, et la seconde de 1854, suivie, un an plus tard, d'une troisième, publiée dans *România literară* sous le titre *24 de ceasuri la Balta Albă*. Liviu Papadima estime qu'il ne serait pas exclu que « la principale option narratologique de la première version, celle de confier le récit à un voyageur français qui visite les terres roumaines pour la première fois, ait pu préfigurer dans une certaine mesure l'idée d'adresser le texte à un public occidental »⁷. Quoiqu'il en soit, *Balta Albă* représente un véritable chef-d'oeuvre en matière de jeux de perspective, offrant au lecteur une représentation fictionnelle plausible, savoureuse et surtout drôle de la « galerie des contrastes » qui fut l'emblème de la société roumaine de la première moitié du XIXe siècle et même plus tard.

Alecsandri recourt au schéma du récit-cadre, souvent utilisé par les prosateurs de l'époque, dessinant ainsi dès le début un espace dialogique dans lequel il place tout le récit ultérieur. Le décor oriental, composé en recourant à une série de détails « scénographiques » porteurs de sens, s'avère parfaitement adapté au déroulement d'histoires sur le Soi et l'Autre : les invités sont allongés sur des divans, « armés de grandes chibouques, qui produisaient une atmosphère enfumée digne de la salle sélamlik d'un pacha »⁸ ; le mauvais temps et le ciel aux nuages menaçants favorisent, à leur tour, le retrait dans la tranquillité de l'intérieur protecteur et le refuge dans des conversations agréables. Dans cette ambiance orientale, on distingue la voix d'un jeune « peintre français », nouvellement arrivé sur les terres roumaines, désireux de partager avec ses

⁶ *Idem*, p. 136.

⁷ *Idem*, p. 137. La traduction en français nous appartient.

⁸ V. Alecsandri, *Proză*. Ediție îngrijită și studiu introductiv de G.C.Nicolescu, București, Editura pentru literatură, 1966, p. 172. La traduction en français nous appartient.

amis les aventures qu'il a vécues depuis son arrivée à Brăila. La conversation autour de l'invité, sur un ton plaisant et sans engagement, anticipe certains des thèmes de l'histoire qu'il racontera : la distance qui sépare les deux civilisations, les suppositions et les attentes du voyageur liées à l'exploration du nouveau territoire, le sentiment de découverte (« comme un nouveau Colomb »⁹), l'étrangeté de l'expérience, le contraste brutal entre l'attente et la surprise, souvent volontairement exagéré, avec de l'humour et une dose bienvenue d'auto-ironie. L'ingéniosité du prosateur est particulièrement évidente lorsqu'il s'agit d'alterner les perspectives : celle, dominante, du peintre français est complétée ou corrigée par deux autres points de vue : celui des locaux, d'une part, et celui d'intermédiaires occasionnels qui tentent de concilier les intuitions et les perplexités du voyageur avec la connaissance de soi des populations locales. *Balta Albă* offre donc un matériel précieux pour étudier le phénomène de l'altérité, avec tout ce que cela implique, en particulier la question de la « dissemblance culturelle ». De plus, le fait que l'étranger soit également peintre permet au prosateur d'absorber les abstractions dans la concrétude d'une représentation pleine de couleurs et de détails mémorables, interrogeant de manière écrasante le régime visuel de la réalité explorée. Par ailleurs, les théoriciens concernés par la problématique de l'altérité – qu'ils soient philosophes, anthropologues ou historiens de l'art – confirment les intuitions de l'auteur, lorsqu'il postule, comme solution possible pour réduire la distance entre soi et l'Autre, l'abandon de l'ordre du discours au profit de l'ordre du visible. C'est, entre autres, le cas de Victor Ieronim Stoichiță qui, dans son remarquable essai *L'Image de l'Autre. Noirs, Juifs, Musulmans et Gitans dans l'art occidental des temps modernes*, part du postulat que l'imagologie peut compléter l'approche purement anthropologique, en interrogeant d'abord le régime visuel au sein duquel se construit l'altérité, conscient de l'évidence que nous ne sommes « un Autre/ Autres que sous le regard de quelqu'un »¹⁰.

De l'abbé de Marenne à Antoine Bernard

Dans la première moitié du XXe siècle, Mihail Sadoveanu est sans aucun doute le prosateur qui donne une notoriété accrue au motif de l'étranger,

⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰ Victor Ieronim Stoichiță, *Imaginea Celuilalt. Negri, evrei, musulmani și țigani în arta occidentală în zorii epocii moderne 1453-1800*, traducere din limba franceză de Anca Oroveanu și Ruxandra Demetrescu, București, Humanitas, 2017, p. 36.

l'enrichissant en même temps de nouvelles valences, en accord avec sa vision très personnelle du passé historique et de la mythologie autochtone. Parmi les écrits de Sadoveanu, les romans *Zodia Cancerului sau vremea Ducăi Vodă* [*Le règne du prince Douca ou le signe du Cancer*]-1929, respectivement *Noaptea de Sânziene* [*Les Nuits de Sânziene*]-1934 offrent au lecteur – outre l'intrigue épique captivante, redevable à cet « humanisme oriental et byzantin, extrait et purifié des vieux livres de la tradition populaire »¹¹ – l'occasion de réfléchir aux relations complexes entre « Nous » et « Les Autres ».

Il n'est pas exclu que la subtilité dont fait preuve le prosateur dans cette direction (évitant habilement les généralisations et les simplifications manichéennes) trouve ses racines dans ses années de formation, années d'« apprentissage » comme il préfère les appeler, avec une phrase présente même dans le titre du volume autobiographique de 1944. Plus précisément, Mihail Sadoveanu parle dans les pages de cette autobiographie au titre gothéen, de la « chance » d'avoir bénéficié de deux modèles éducatifs opposés (le paternel et le maternel), heureusement harmonisés au final, aussi improbable que cela puisse paraître, dans la personnalité du futur écrivain. Souvent citée, la confession suivante jette une lumière crue sur la polarité en question (réductible, d'un coup d'œil, aux tensions entre rationalisme et mysticisme), dont les reflets sont discernables, assez clairement, dans l'architecture impeccable de l'univers fictionnel de Sadoveanu :

« Jusqu'à l'âge de transition, j'avais appartenu à mon père. Naturellement et logiquement, il avait mis en moi tout ce qu'il avait en tant que citadin. Mon père était un boyard voltairien et sceptique. Il exprimait son antipathie envers les „formes” de religion. Il avait une répulsion pour la paysannerie avec ses yeux, ses oreilles et son odorat. [...] Un de ses soucis avait été de me sortir de la „malice”, c'est-à-dire de la bêtise du peuple. [...] Après la mort de ma mère, mes connaissances et ma réflexion accrues m'ont emmené au-delà de la zone dangereuse de la stérilité, là où les imbéciles de notre couche superposée s'arrêtent définitivement. [...] Soudain, mes yeux se sont ouverts et mes oreilles se sont dressées. Je suis devenu l'allié de ma mère. Un jour, mon père m'a regardé avec étonnement. J'opposais à son scepticisme les réalités spirituelles d'un peuple ancien, sévèrement confiné à la discipline de ses coutumes. »¹²

¹¹ Tudor Vianu, *Arta prozatorilor români*, București, Editura Eminescu, 1966, p. 229.

¹² Mihail Sadoveanu, *Anii de ucenicie. Cele mai vechi amintiri. Nada florilor*, București, Editura Minerva, 1970, p. 78-79. La traduction en français nous appartient.

Au-delà de la tentation de lire l'œuvre dans une clé psychanalytique sous l'emprise des confessions comme celles-ci, on pourrait aussi spéculer sur des stratégies compensatoires, comme par exemple cette « tendance à iconiser le récit »¹³ détectée par Monica Spiridon, tendance qui s'est de plus en plus accentuée au fil du temps chez Sadoveanu, l'écrivain parvenant – dans ses livres les plus raffinés – à convertir « l'angoisse de l'influence » en un « type particulier de narcissisme (au sens gidien) de la littérature »¹⁴.

Ce narcissisme *sui generis* transparaît également, à mieux regarder, dans les pages du roman historique *Zodia cancerului sau Vremea Ducăi Vodă* (1929), qui trouve son origine dans un (pré)texte antérieur : un prétendu récit de voyage d'un abbé de Marenne, envoyé par Louis XIV à la Sublime Porte, comme ambassadeur, missionnaire, émissaire secret et probablement espion. À cette occasion, le savant prélat français traverse la Moldavie durant le troisième règne de Gheorghe Duca, où il rencontre le beyzade Alecu Ruset, le fils du voïvode que Duca avait détrôné. Ici, aux Portes de l'Orient, l'abbé a la révélation d'un monde d'une incroyable beauté naturelle (mais dévasté par une histoire cruelle) et d'une humanité qui regarde avec résignation ce paradis dévasté « à la frontière des barbares », connaissant et respectant l'ancienne vérité selon laquelle les mondes, tout comme les hommes, ont leur destin (pré)écrit dans les étoiles. La conversation entre Paul de Marenne et Alecu Ruset dans les premières pages du livre est symptomatique de ce point de vue :

« – Oh, mon précieux ami, dit Alecu en soupirant amèrement, en se penchant vers l'abbé et en embrassant ses paumes, dodues et douces comme du pain frais ; laissez-moi vous dire que vous devez louer Dieu de vous avoir fait un homme et non une bête, – un Français et non un Moldave, – un noble et non un fou, – un abbé et non un saint... Car ainsi vous pouvez voir la misère dans laquelle nous, les déshérités, luttons ici, à la frontière des barbares...

– Avec de tels vins et de telles recettes de tartes, peut-on être malheureux ?
Demande innocemment l'abbé [...]

– Nous pouvons l'être, car rien ne peut racheter notre déséquilibre. Soyez sûr que nous vivons, Monsieur de Marenne, dans un lieu où naissent et passent les tourbillons de Dieu et des hommes ; où les calamités se trouvent dans des choses comme le miel dans les fleurs. »¹⁵

¹³ Monica Spiridon, *Sadoveanu. Divanul înțeleptului cu lumea*, București, Albatros, 1982, p. 102.

¹⁴ *Idem*, p. 74.

¹⁵ Mihail Sadoveanu, *Zodia Cancerului sau Vremea Ducăi-Vodă*, București, Editura Militară,

Le roman est composé de deux grandes parties qui s'entrecroisent : le voyage de Paul de Marenne, abbé de Juvigny, à travers la Moldavie du XVII^e siècle, en route vers Istanbul (séquence représentant la structure philosophique du drame), et le drame lui-même, à savoir l'histoire d'amour tragique entre le beyzade Alecu Ruset et la princesse Catrina, la fille de Duca-Vodă. L'échec de cet amour, prévisible par ailleurs, se projette sur la toile de fond d'un monde à la dérive, à un tournant de l'histoire, que le voyageur étranger saisit non seulement superficiellement, comme dans le récit de Vasile Alecsandri, mais dans toute sa complexité déconcertante, grâce à la fois à sa perspicacité et, surtout, à son implication émotionnelle (l'amitié sincère qui le lie au fils de l'ancien seigneur et qui se manifeste également à travers les nombreuses tentatives de le sauver, notamment à travers une partie d'échecs inédite). Le lien entre les deux héros est plus complexe qu'on pourrait être tenté de le croire. Mircea Iorgulescu a raison de considérer le beyzade Alecu Ruset non seulement comme un guide, mais aussi comme un double imparfait de l'abbé de Marenne, puisqu'il est lui-même, dans une large mesure, « un étranger dans la Moldavie de ce Duca-Vodă toujours sombre ; poursuivi, suspecté, isolé, à cause de son statut, potentiellement dangereux pour Duca, de fils et donc héritier de l'ancien voïvode¹⁶.

On observe comment, attrapé dans le réseau dense de thèmes et de motifs du roman de Sadoveanu, sur le fond d'une vision essentiellement tragique de l'histoire, le motif illuministe du « Persan » acquiert désormais des valences initiatiques et sapientielles, puisque l'enjeu du voyage des deux personnages demeure – au-delà de l'inventaire des apparences confuses et contradictoires de la vie de Duca-Vodă en Moldavie – la réflexion sérieuse sur l'éternel retour du même mal historique. Par conséquent, le roman ne se contente pas de mettre face à face deux mondes, celui de la civilisation et celui de la barbarie, mais tente d'expliquer, autant que possible, leurs ressorts cachés.

Placé sous le signe de la fatalité, sur le fond d'une époque apocalyptique, *Zodia Cancerului* instrumente essentiellement, comme beaucoup d'autres écrits du prosateur, l'intuition d'une profonde solidarité entre la nature, l'homme et l'histoire (placée cette fois non pas sous le signe de l'Âge d'or, mais sous le signe négatif de la Crise). Son instinct d'artiste authentique, attaché aux subtilités byzantines, éloigne Sadoveanu, comme toujours, des solutions faciles. Cela démontre – comme on l'a noté – qu'il « ne fait pas l'éloge de l'archaïsme

1986, p. 56. La traduction en français nous appartient.

¹⁶ Mircea Iorgulescu, „Prefață” la Mihail Sadoveanu, *Zodia Cancerului sau Vremea Ducăi-Vodă*, București, Editura Militară, 1986, p. 13. La traduction en français nous appartient.

et du primitivisme, mais essaie d'en trouver le sens »¹⁷, cherchant – comme dans presque tous ses écrits de maturité – à découvrir le point d'inflexion de quelques réalités apparemment inconciliables.

Cette inclination de l'écrivain s'observe également dans *Noaptea de Sânziene*, le micro-roman de 1934, qui marque un nouveau pas vers la récupération (par régression dans une préhistoire nébuleuse) d'un territoire roumain mythologique, une sorte de Dacie intemporelle et fantastique, convertie en symbole des lois de la nature. L'intrigue du roman est, en apparence, facile à résumer : ayant atteint une impasse financière en raison de sa passion pour la construction d'avions, le rêveur propriétaire terrien Lupu Mavrocosti, descendant d'une vieille famille de boyards de Moldavie, se tourne vers son ami français, Antoine Bernard, lui cédant les droits sur l'ancienne forêt de Borza. Les deux hommes s'étaient rencontrés pendant la Première Guerre mondiale, lorsque Bernard était membre de la mission militaire française, dirigée par le général Henri Mathias Berthelot, et que le prince Mavrocosti avait commandé deux batteries d'obusiers lors des batailles de Mărăști et Mărășești. Attiré par les perspectives d'exploitation forestière, mais aussi par une possible alliance matrimoniale avec l'imprévisible et séduisante Kivi Mavrocosti, la sœur de Lupu, Bernard arrive sur les lieux à la veille de la fête de Sânziene (le 24 juin 1927) et tente, pendant un an, de mettre son projet en pratique. Entre ces deux nuits de Sânziene (celle de 1927 et celle de 1928), s'inscrit effectivement l'intrigue du roman. Pendant ce temps, la forêt millénaire, (dont les créatures, réunies en conseil secret lors de la Nuit de Sânziene, sont les premières à proclamer la résistance à son abolition), la population locale, les éléments de la nature et même Lupu Mavrocosti combattront l'entrepreneur français de toutes les manières pour l'empêcher de réaliser son plan. Défait dans ses aspirations entrepreneuriales et sentimentales, Antoine Bernard abandonne finalement le combat, avec dignité, mais aussi résigné à un monde qui l'intrigue et le fascine à la fois. Un monde où la population locale ignore de manière programmatique les principes de rationalité, les contrats et les règles imposés de l'extérieur, continuant à obéir à des lois non écrites, tandis que la nature – parfois séduisante, parfois menaçante – transmet des messages accessibles uniquement aux initiés, connaisseurs des codes anciens. Quoi qu'il en soit, le roman de Sadoveanu va bien au-delà du schématisme de la prose envisagée par la revue *Sămănătorul*. Nicolae Manolescu se trompe lorsqu'il cite, parmi les traits distinctifs du livre, l'ingéniosité (en

¹⁷ *Idem*, p.15.

l'opposant à une grande imagination fantastique) et le fait qu'il s'agirait d'un roman à thèse¹⁸. Il serait plus approprié de suivre ici, sur les traces de C. Stănescu, la dialectique de la mythification et de la re-mythification, car en entrelaçant habilement le fantastique pur avec la dérision de la mise en scène du mythe, mais aussi avec son pouvoir de renaître, Sadoveanu parvient à donner vie à un monde d'équivoque troublante, dans lequel « les niveaux, les significations et les valeurs changent en permanence et de manière kaléidoscopique »¹⁹, trahissant ainsi une fine ironie, à peine perceptible, capable de tester les frontières entre diverses catégories idéologiques ou esthétiques, une ironie traduite souvent dans la passion pour les jeux intellectuels.

En ce qui concerne le regard porté sur l'étranger, ni dans *Zodia Cancerului* ni dans *Noaptea de Sânziene*, les français ne sont pas de héros négatifs. L'attitude du narrateur à leur égard est objective, détachée. À leur tour, Paul de Marenne et Antoine Bernard affichent une attitude rationnelle et quelque peu détachée face à la réalité qu'ils explorent : tous les deux restent extérieurs au monde des Portes de l'Orient, même s'ils se laissent temporairement séduire par lui. En ce sens, Paul Cernat a affirmé à juste titre que l'abbé de Marenne « découvre, au-delà du primitivisme apparent des autochtones, une diplomatie culinaire spectaculaire et efficace »²⁰, tandis que, dans le cas de l'ingénieur Bernard, « la tentation féminine des lieux est associée à l'intérêt suscité par les « primitifs » et les « élites » autochtones »²¹. La conclusion parfaitement plausible formulée par le critique souligne le rôle fondamental joué par la convention de l'étranger dans l'équation complexe de la prose (anti)moderne de Sadoveanu :

« Le paradoxe, remarqué par les commentateurs des dernières décennies, consiste dans le fait que la modernité de Sadoveanu est conquise par une « obsolescence » /distance programmatique délibérée du présent, qui implique non seulement une [...] perspective intellectuelle, distanciée de manière sapientielle [...], mais aussi *un*

¹⁸ « Là où l'imagination fantastique fait défaut, il y a toujours place à l'ingéniosité. *Noaptea de Sânziene* appartient sans aucun doute à cette dernière catégorie, étant, comme *Aurul negru* de Cezar Petrescu, un roman à thèse qui suit les principes de la revue *Sămănătorul*. ». N. Manolescu, *Sadoveanu sau utopia cărții*, ed. a III-a, Pitești, Editura Paralela 45, 2002, p. 105. La traduction en français nous appartient.

¹⁹ Lionel Decebal Roșca, „Noaptea de Sânziene” în DAOLR, vol. III, M-P, Cluj-Napoca, Casa Cărții de Știință, 2001, p. 151.

²⁰ Paul Cernat, „Huronul și persanul. Modele și referințe franceze la Mihail Sadoveanu”, *Caiețe critice*, nr. 11 (373), 2018, p. 34.

²¹ *Ibidem*.

style de distance temporelle. Or, cette distanciation par laquelle l'Orient (ou, mieux dit, les Orient) et l'archaïque autochtone sont récupérés, en clé initiatique, s'opère à travers le filtre de l'occidentalisation, c'est-à-dire en adoptant la perspective de l'étranger »²².

Comme on peut le constater, loin de conduire à des simplifications manichéennes, le point de vue de l'étranger confère à la prose de Sadoveanu à la fois complexité et profondeur, les héros comme les narrateurs des deux romans semblant partager l'opinion de Marco Polo dans *Les Villes invisibles*, le roman mémorable d'Italo Calvino. Là, comme on s'en souvient, l'explorateur explique à un moment donné à Kublai Khan que l'essence d'une ville est faite d'un continuum spatio-temporel, c'est-à-dire de « connexions entre les mesures de l'espace et les événements du passé »²³, et pas seulement de la matérialité trompeuse des surfaces. Une description qui peut s'appliquer également – faut-il en dire plus ? – à la vision de Sadoveanu.

Une parabole du pouvoir des années 1980

Dans les années '80 du XXe siècle, Maria Luiza Cristescu a remis l'accent sur la convention de l'étranger dans le roman *Privilegiu* (1987). L'action de ce roman, publié vers la fin de la dictature de Ceaușescu, se déroule en Moldavie, dans la première partie du XIXe siècle, sous le règne de Mihail Sturza. Le livre est paru à une époque où les écrivains roumains préféraient le style allusif ou parabolique, une stratégie qui leur permettait de critiquer indirectement le régime politique de Bucarest. Autrement dit, même si l'espace épique est recherché au XIXe siècle, les significations plus ou moins cachées de cette régression dans l'histoire s'adressent en réalité aux contemporains. De cette façon, Maria Luiza Cristescu rejoint une série d'écrivains en prose qui – en recourant aux précautions nécessaires dans le contexte d'avant décembre 1989 – prenaient, en substance, une radiographie du présent, le dissimulant dans le passé.

Privilegiu nous ramène donc dans le temps, dans la Moldavie de Mihail Sturza, à un carrefour de l'histoire, à une époque d'intrigues de toutes sortes, mais aussi de renouveau accéléré, où les coutumes phanariotes commencent

²² *Ibidem*.

²³ Italo Calvino, *Le città invisibili*, Torino, Einaudi, 1972, p. 21. La traduction en français nous appartient.

à être remplacées par d'autres, importées par l'aristocratie de l'époque de la civilisation occidentale. Cette atmosphère confuse, caractéristique de toutes les époques de transition, est perçue à travers le regard d'un étranger – à savoir Simon, le jeune français engagé comme précepteur auprès des enfants d'une vieille famille de boyards de Moldavie – dont on apprend, au début du livre, qu'il aime par-dessus tout la littérature et la liberté, soit précisément ce qui manque à sa patrie d'adoption. Le contenu de la relation de l'étranger avec l'espace d'adoption représente, en substance, le thème central de ce roman, qui s'appuie, entre autres points forts, sur une documentation sociologique approfondie de l'époque. De plus, l'auteur démontre également une capacité indéniable à réinterpréter des thèmes et des motifs consacrés. Jusqu'à un certain point, ce que le regard pénétrant du précepteur français enregistre en arrivant à la résidence de la famille Hartular ne diffère pas beaucoup de la « galerie de contrastes » qui a intrigué le peintre dans le récit d'Alecsandri. Au début, le français du roman de Maria Luiza Cristescu est désagréablement surpris par le manque apparent de politesse des propriétaires qui ne l'accueillent pas à Iași et ne l'informent pas de venir directement au domaine. Cette première impression est corrigée lors de la rencontre avec Mme Hartular par son apparence agréable, la manière amicale et informelle avec laquelle elle s'adresse à lui, et surtout par le fait qu'elle connaissait plusieurs langues, s'adressant à lui dans un français courant :

« Ils étaient à dix pas l'un de l'autre. Lui, couvert de poussière de la route et les os écrasés par le trajet en calèche, elle qui le regarde sans la moindre trace de curiosité. Monsieur Simon, le précepteur, Madame Hartular, la maîtresse. Ils avaient convenu par lettre qu'il se présenterait aux maisons familiales à Iași, où les propriétaires ne l'attendaient pas. Un administrateur l'avait mis dans ce véhicule en direction de Fălticeni. Il n'avait pas non plus trouvé ses propriétaires ici. Il n'avait même pas posé le pied sur terre qu'un prêtre à la voix rauque, habillé d'une soutane retroussée, l'avait entraîné plus loin vers la terre de Neamț [...] Simon suivait la ligne de ses sourcils allongés vers ses tempes, le regard fixé quelque part, qui ne semblait pas le remarquer. Les pommettes olive, le nez fin, les lèvres semblaient aussi frissonner comme la toile d'un lac sous la rafale de vent »²⁴.

²⁴ Maria Luiza Cristescu, *Privilegiu*, București, Cartea Românească, 1987, p. 8–9. La traduction en français nous appartient.

De même, l'aspect désordonné de la cour et l'architecture chaotique du manoir et des dépendances contrastent, évidemment, avec l'intérieur luxueux, qui lui fait penser à l'image d'un Orient fabuleux, comme celui d'Halima, qu'il connaissait bien grâce aux livres. Peu à peu, le précepteur français introduit de nouvelles coutumes dans la maison du boyard Hartular, dont la plupart ont été acceptées avec difficulté par certaines personnes qui portaient des shalvars et des bonnets turcs jusqu'à son arrivée.

Ensuite, dans *Privilegiu*, la « mise en scène » est également ingénieuse, insérant des pages du journal de Simon qui doublent le récit romanesque des faits qui constituent l'intrigue du récit. L'auteur parvient à maintenir en permanence l'équilibre nécessaire entre narration et commentaire, récit et discours, essai et roman. Les noyaux épiques sont étayés par quelques observations fines et détaillées, surtout lorsque la réalité est vue à travers les yeux d'étrangers. L'attitude de l'élément allogène envers le « nouveau » monde dans lequel il entre s'exprime également à travers les voix des autres personnages. Par exemple, le consul français de Broudelle prévient son jeune compatriote : « Ce monde vous change. Il vous corrompt. Dans les colonies, nous civilisons les primitifs ou les sauvages. Ici, les indigènes nous encerclent d'une toile d'araignée, nous noient dans leur ruse et leur ignorance... Tout est incertain, flou, perfide »²⁵.

Progressivement, Simon commence vraiment à se métamorphoser, sous l'influence d'un monde qui ne le choque plus autant qu'au début, mais le séduit de plus en plus, finissant par l'assimiler. Sous la pression de cette fascination, le français commence à codifier ses notes, ses pensées et ses gestes selon les coutumes des « indigènes », épouse Arghira, la fille d'un boyard local, s'implique dans des complots et des intrigues, reçoit des missions secrètes et s'installe définitivement, devenant « le boyard Simion ».

Aussi invraisemblable que puisse paraître cette transformation, elle est parfaitement justifiée dans l'équation de cet ingénieux récit aésopien, dans lequel l'accent est déplacé vers les effets déshumanisants du Pouvoir : « Le Pouvoir – note Simon dans son journal – fait d'une vigne qui s'étend drue, vivante, se déplaçant sur les maisons, sur les arbres, un réseau de leviers précis et bien tendus, qui s'assemblent en grinçant ou non et agissent d'une seule manière. »²⁶. Cette définition fournit un argument supplémentaire en faveur de l'inclusion du roman de Maria Luiza Cristescu dans la série des « paraboles du

²⁵ *Idem*, p. 148.

²⁶ *Idem*, p. 63.

pouvoir » des années 1980, aux côtés d'écrits similaires tels que ceux signés par Ștefan Agopian, Silviu Angelescu, Dana Dumitriu ou Eugen Uricariu.

En fait, la conclusion la plus troublante que ce type de vision avance est qu'après tout, « non seulement l'histoire mystifie l'individu et le dépersonnalise, mais l'individu lui-même se falsifie sous la pression d'une histoire chaotique et oppressive et finit par aduler, même dans un écrit intime, la grandeur de l'histoire »²⁷. En d'autres termes, l'individu finit par s'automystifier.

Conclusion

Comme nous pouvons le constater à partir de cet aperçu, la convention de l'étranger représente l'un des procédés privilégiés par les écrivains roumains de différentes époques. Même à l'époque contemporaine, des écrivains comme Filip Florian ou Cezar Amariei l'utilisent dans leurs écrits, démontrant que ses ressources sont loin d'être épuisées. Cette longévité du processus, en partie explicable par l'intérêt des prosateurs contemporains pour la réécriture du passé et pour la manière dont les avatars de l'altérité sont (re)configurés, démontre à la fois la durabilité et la force formatrice du modèle français sur la littérature roumaine. Les échos de l'exclamation des *Lettres persanes* se font encore entendre aujourd'hui.

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²⁷ E. Simion, „Romanul istoric” în *România Literară*, nr. 18/ 1987, p.5.

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EMINESCU'S "THE MORNING STAR" IN BANAT BULGARIAN LITERATURE – BETWEEN MARGINS AND CENTERS

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Abstract: The community of Bulgarian Catholics in Banat is an example of cultural synchronization through translations of works by Romanian and Bulgarian authors into the Banat version of the Bulgarian literary language. The study presents one of the translations of Mihai Eminescu's most famous poem, „*Luceafărul*” (“*The Morning Star*”) in Banat, focusing on the role of translation in juxtaposing the marginal literature of the Banat Bulgarians with Romanian and Bulgarian literature. What is created in the periphery in relation to the centre becomes a centre in itself. Texts that construct their own cultural space through the interpenetration of different models of describing the world through speech create the conditions for the emergence of a new centre. The theoretical model that represents this process is the philosophy of pragmatism developed by Charles S. Peirce. His semiotic theory captures processes and their changes in motion, is flexible, and offers a valuable terminological apparatus.

Keywords: Banat Bulgarians, Banat, Mihai Eminescu, Star Beshenov, Hyperion

This study analyzes the attempt to synchronise literary creativity within a community perceiving itself as peripheral to the centre, such as the community of the Banat Bulgarians. What is special about this community is that it is marginal to at least two cultural centres. Separated from the development of Bulgarian society, the resettled Catholic Bulgarians share the historical path of the Banat region, being successively part of the Habsburg Empire, of Austria-Hungary, and after the partition in 1918, falling within the borders of two states, Romania and Serbia. The return to the Bulgarian lands of some of the people at the end of the 19th century after the liberation of Bulgaria from

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Ottoman rule turned the Banat Bulgarians into a community living in three countries, which retained its unity thanks to specific characteristics. How do the self-awareness and cultural processes function in the presence of several centres to which they relate and different languages among which they manage to keep their own? I find some of the answers in the emblematic inclusion of Mihai Eminescu's poetry in the functioning of the Banat variant of the Bulgarian literary language¹. This offshoot of the language lives in the dynamics of names not yet fully established, and for the representatives of the community, it is "Palkenian" and for the rest, it is Banat Bulgarian. The Latin alphabet is its hallmark and a sign of the in-betweenness between two different cultural systems. The study will not dwell on translation techniques or successes given the complex inter-lingual situation, but will seek to explain the purpose of the poem's assimilation and inclusion in the community's literary corpus.

Tracing the historical preconditions and particularities will outline the context in which the specific cultural sphere under consideration emerged. In the region of Banat² in the 18th century, the settlement waves created two centres of the Bulgarian community within the Habsburg Empire. The first wave started after the suppression of the uprising in 1688 in the flourishing Catholic centre of Chiprovtsi and the surrounding few villages. The second came from the former Pavlikan villages around Nikopol—Oresh, Trunchovitsa, Petokladentsi, Belene, etc., which had been converted to the Catholic Church. The emergence of Catholicism in Chiprovtsi was due to the settlement of Saxon miners, the so-called Saxons,³ who developed the mining industry and

¹ The term was coined by Magdalena Abadzhieva, who adopted the phrase "Banat variant of the Bulgarian language" (Magdalena Abadzhieva, "The Banat Bulgarians between the Banat speech and the Palken language", *Bulgarian Language and Literature*, no. 65, 2023, p. 527–530).

² Banat is a historical-geographical region in southeastern Europe with the borders of Mureş in the north, the river Tisza in the west, the river Danube to the south, the Carpathians to the east. Its total area is 28.523 sq. km. It is flat in the west and hilly and mountainous in the east. After World War I, the state border was drawn along the topography. The larger eastern part went to Romania, and the western, smaller part to Yugoslavia. The main river in the area is the Timis. The main town is Timișoara (Temesvar). The Romanian part is divided into three counties: Timis-Torontal, Karas and Severin. Banat is one of the three historical regions forming the autonomous region of Vojvodina in Serbia. The other two are Bačka and Srem. A small part of Banat remains in Hungary in the vicinity of the town of Szeged.

³ Saxon miners, called "Saxons" in Bulgaria, who settled in the ore-rich areas of southeastern Europe. "Sassy" is more the name of a craft stratum than an ethnonym. According to Irecek: "Saxons" („sași"). In the Middle Ages, there were colonies of German ore miners in Bosnia, Serbia, Bulgaria and Wallachia, who were constantly called Sasi by the Bulgarians and Serbs.

turned the town into a thriving place with their livelihood and cultural life. From there, it began to spread among the Pavlikians⁴ in North-Central Bulgaria. The first mission consisted of Bosnian Franciscans under the leadership of Peter Solinat (1565–1623). He made efforts to attract the Pavlikians settled in Northern Bulgaria. Paulicianism was a dualistic heresy that, along with Bogomilism in the Middle Ages, influenced life not only in Bulgarian lands but also far beyond their borders. It possessed characteristics that distinguished it from the Orthodox Bulgarians. The representatives of the conservative and closed community stand out for their unwavering vitality and persistence in holding to their beliefs. The Chiprovians are craftsmen and merchants of high self-esteem and culture who seek their place in the European world, while the former Pavlikians are peasants who live isolated in small communities and move when threatened.

From these two groups emerged the community of Bulgarian Catholics in Bulgaria. They identify themselves as the bearers of the “strong faith,”⁵ which is distinguished by a high degree of conscious and proud Bulgarian self-consciousness, coupled with the aspiration for constant movement and migration of the Pavlikians. The community experienced upheaval when the uprising was suppressed in 1688 and branched out in a new direction—the community of the Banat Bulgarians was created. In 1738, the village of Star Beshenov (today with the Romanian name of Dudești Vechi) appeared in the Banat plain, founded by the settlers from the villages around the Danube,

There is no doubt that these Saxons came from Magyar at the beginning to Bosnia, namely towards the end of the 12th century, under the famous Kulin Ban; and even now the Bosnian miners use some Old German expressions. Later chronicles attribute the settlement of Saxons in Serbia to King Stefan Vladislav (1234–1240), who was the first to mint Serbian coins. Saxons first appear in Serbian documents under Vladislav’s successor Stefan Uroš I and are frequently mentioned from then until the 15th century, see Ireček, *History of the Bulgarians*, Sofia, Science and Art, 1978, p. 441.

⁴ Paulicianism as a heretical spiritual doctrine emerged in the second half of the seventh century in the eastern border territories of the Byzantine Empire, more precisely in Armenia and Syria during the reign of Emperor Constantine II (641–668). It penetrated the Balkan Peninsula and the Bulgarian lands in the 8th–10th centuries through the deportations of Armenians and Syrians from Asia Minor and their settlement in Thrace to defend the border with Bulgaria, and later in the southwestern Bulgarian lands. From the middle of the 15th century onwards, Pavlikian settlements along the river began to appear in Ottoman records. In the middle of the XVII century the Ottoman Empire already listed 16 settlements in Central Northern Bulgaria, Thrace, Macedonia, see Blagovest Nyagulov, *The Banat Bulgarians*, Sofia, Paradigma, 1999, p. 15–17.

⁵ “The strong faith” is a name by which Catholics in Bulgaria identify themselves, an expression of their great religious perseverance.

and 1741 is the year in which the documents record the appearance of Vinga, founded by the survivors of the Chiprovtsi uprising.

Over the years, as a consequence of demographic growth, several more Bulgarian villages appeared in Banat. After the division of the region between Romania, Hungary, and Serbia in 1918, it fell into the territory of Romania and Serbia. The liberation of Bulgaria from Ottoman rule caused some of the Banat Bulgarians to return to the "old nest," according to the special law on the settlement of the uninhabited lands in Bulgaria promulgated by the National Assembly in May 1880⁶. Currently, the community lives on the territory of three countries, and the processes in the settlements are identical, which is due to the facilitated communication, but also to the self-awareness established over the centuries.

The main characteristics that turn the Banat Bulgarians into a specific offshoot of the general Bulgarian culture are related to the peculiarities of the formative processes. Firstly, the connection with the Catholic Church not only built the community during the migration but also actively helped to preserve it. Second, they accepted the decision to write in Latin in 1862 to 1865 with the creation of their own orthography. Third, a particular consciousness of kinship in an eternally mobile existence was forged. It is "nuclearly native" in its nature, as it encapsulates each of the settlements in capsules of memory, building a network of interactions between the narrative of each settlement's past and the shared memory of the migrations. The narrative of the migrations, the belief, the language, and the costume are characteristic features that anchor the self-consciousness in relative internal stability.

The Romanian language entered through schools and state institutions after 1918, replacing the influence of Hungarian and German from the previous period. The threat of assimilation has existed throughout the period since the beginning of settlement in Banat. Only the dominant languages changed. The most distant link is with Bulgaria due to the remoteness of the diaspora. This creates the conditions in the quest for a distinct literary language that is a treasure trove of community memory, through translations to seek synchronization with models that are the standard and canon in the surrounding cultural and literary environment.

The most prepared for such a leap is the poet Gyuka Gergulov (born 1941 in Star Beshenov, Dudești Vechi), who translated the poem "The Morning Star"

⁶ Blagovest Nyagulov, *op. cit.*, p. 87

by Mihai Eminescu into Banat Bulgarian without knowing the translations of the same poem into Bulgarian. A prominent author and informal community leader, he was the main driving figure of the new “revival” in the emergence of periodicals of the Bulgarians in Banat after the time of totalitarianism in Romania. His life illustrates the stages in the development of literature in the community and the influences to which it was subjected. He studied at a seminary and mastered Latin perfectly, but did not take the path of the priesthood. She developed an appreciation for poetry and the beauty of language with much reading and early creative experiences. He left the seminary and worked as a clerk for the congregation of Old Beshenov, where he remained until his retirement. His literary pursuits were in service to the community, and his poetic talent continued to build a core body of texts that covered all areas of cultural life. He was the spirit who built the concept of the newspaper *Naša glas*, which appeared in Timisoara in 1990, and was its editor-in-chief until 2000.

The main pain of the creators of the word in the community of the Banat Bulgarians is that they are educated in the schools of other countries and meet with the samples of literature that are part of a different cultural background. This leads to the encapsulation of one’s own language to preserve it, but this encloses it within the framework of clan and lifestyle. The universal problems spill over into poetic forms in foreign languages. As a salvation for their own language, under the pressure of an inherently Renaissance aspiration, they began to translate poetry to prove that this branch of the Bulgarian language was also worthy of conveying the beauty of the word.

Many are tempted, but the translation of Mihai Eminescu’s (1850–1889) most significant poem, „Luceafărul” (“The Morning Star”, 1883) by Gyuka Gergulov can be considered an achievement. In Bulgarian, the name of the poem is Hyperion, and in Palkian it is *Zvezdelinku*. The choice of the work was not made at random. Aiming at the most significant example of the poetic word in Romanian literature, it seeks to match the Banat Bulgarian with the poetic qualities of the work. The translation was first published in the newspaper “*Naša glas*,” issue 11 of 1990,⁷ and is presented bilingually in parallel with the Romanian original. The work is introduced with an explanation by the translator of the motives and history of the translation’s realisation, which sets the reader in context and sets out the possible readings. There is another

⁷ Gyuka Gergulov, “Patni Beležci”, *Naša glas*, no. 11, 1990, p. 1–2.

previous attempt to translate Mihai Eminescu's poems into the Banat version of the Bulgarian literary language by Karol Ivančov, but it will not be the subject of this study. It is from him that Gergulov departs, as he explains in the introduction to the poem published in the newspaper:

Tale of the Star

The stars are hard to talk about. They are very high. The most certain thing one can say, however educated one may be, is that they shine, they glitter... Their light is so much greater, clearer, the thicker the darkness around us. And then, as if they were pulling us, inviting us up, on high, into their world, the world of infinity and eternity...

Much has been written, is being written, and will be written for many years about Eminescu and his poetry. But no one could or can say as much about the great genius as his written sweet and sparkling speech, his brilliant ideas, his great soul embodied in his feelings expressed in a single form.

With the certainty that anyone who takes in hand this "star" of Eminescu, the brightest of all that are in the heights of Romanian poetry, and occupies a deserved place among the stars of world literature, has read and knows the precious and profound thoughts and ideas woven into the verses of the wonderfully reworked folktale, I want to mention just a few things about the Palken version that comes with the original philosophical tale.

Although since my childhood, ever since I began to know the beauty of Eminescu's poetry, I have dreamed of translating it into the Palken language, according to the principles I adopted through study and reading, of the true beauty and value of the written word, a sacred fear has kept me from the heights of the great poetry of the Romanian national poet.

A trivial case gave me the final impulse to overcome fear. I don't remember how I came home with a book written on a typewriter. Half of it was with Eminescu's poems... The other half was something that had the pretensions of being the same in Palkenesque. I had not the strength to humble myself to meet this mockery of the poet and of the Palken language... But the bilingual volume fell into the hands of a young man... The verdict was short and definite: it was nothing! Anyone can write this! At that moment, I cared for nothing but the pain of the young man, who I felt was ashamed that his mother tongue "was nothing" because it was incapable of expressing with dignity and beauty the beautiful thoughts, the high ideas, the beautiful poetry.

And I resolved to make this sinful judgment. And not in any other way, but through the translation into our poor language of Eminescu's most famous and most representative poem—the tale of the dawn-maiden, the brightest, most beautiful, most beloved star.

The first thing I had to decide was the name of the main character, who would be the king's daughter's favorite. I settled on the name *Zvezdelin*, which, though not too common, seemed very appropriate for a hero of a fairy tale. Thus, *Zvezdelinku* was born... As soon as I got to work, I decided to try my hand at a Palkian fairy tale. For a whole month, *Zvezdelinku* gave me no peace day or night. There were days when I could only translate one verse at a time. On March 15, 1989, I finished. It was a great day for me, full of satisfaction that one rarely encounters in one's lifetime. I had no other opportunity but to visit acquaintances and friends to whom I read "a Palken tale". And I was glad that along with the approval, I noticed a pride that "we have a language too".

Later, "*Zvezdelinku*" appeared in *Nasha Glas*, Issue 11 of July 1990, with several typographical and other errors.

If my unworthy work, which was first presented alongside the brilliant verses of Eminescu, awakened good feelings in the souls of the Palkenenses who will read it, it does not at all mean that I have achieved this, but confirms the power and ability of our mother tongue. My greatest satisfaction would be to see another Palkienian "*Zvezdelinku*" appear soon, which would be even closer to the wonderful, bright star of Eminescu⁸.

This long quotation introduces the thinking of the translator and spiritual leader of the community of the Banat Bulgarians, who himself points out the main motive in undertaking this attempt to synchronize the literary as process in the small group with the great poetic mastery of the Romanian poet. The qualities of the literary work, the plot, the composition, and even the characters remain in the background, because the main thing is whether the language will cope with the transformation and assimilation. Literariness is seen more as an opportunity to manifest language, to fit and sculpt it into beautiful forms. The aim is to move out of the generic enclosure and co-measure with the centre by assimilating and acknowledging its values in another linguistic space. Success in this task means that the language has been elevated to its capacity to function as the centre of its own literary tradition.

Eleven translations of "The Morning Star" exist so far in Bulgaria⁹. The best ones are by Dimitar Pantelev and Elisaveta Bagryana. The translator

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Romyana Stancheva, "Mihai Eminescu (1850–1889)", Nychev. Boyan, Savov, 523. G., Yordanova. M., Stancheva. R, *Balkan Literatures (in two parts)*..., Sofia, Academic Publishing House "Marin Drinov", 2024, p. 523.

Gyuka Gergulov does not know them. He lives in an environment that has encapsulated its Bulgarian identity in another specific variant, which, however, has the same cultural aspirations as the whole from which the community has been "diviated"¹⁰. This puts his experience in the particular position of an authentic step of commensuration, and at the same time, an opportunity to make sense of himself as the twelfth known translation into Bulgarian. Following the theoretical model of the American philosopher Charles Peirce (1839–1914), I will analyze this translation as a sign that dynamically separates meanings in each sphere against which it is considered. If the two cultural centres that are Bulgaria and Romania, despite all their points of contact, are also radically different, given their historical, linguistic, cultural, and other particularities, the Banat Bulgarian community appears as a sign with a particular valence. Marginal for its native Bulgarian culture, to which it aspires to be part of, and marginal for the Romanian country, where the main core of its representatives currently lives. The translator Gergulov's attempt to pull values from Romanian culture as legitimizing the Banat variant of the Bulgarian literary language, correlating it with achievements of the poetic thought of the center to which they are closer in their present existence, strives indirectly for recognition and inclusion in the communication between the two centers. A periphery that has the claim to become the centre in its particular linguistic and signifying space.

Mihai Eminescu marks the beginning of modern Romanian poetry. The philosophical problematics of his works make it possible to define him as a "versified Schopenhauer"¹¹ with typical themes such as essence and mask, transience between past and future, expressed with the present, etc. He is considered the last great romantic of European poetry, who contributed to the enrichment of the Romanian literary language. Apart from being the highest to which a translator can aspire to test his skills and the abilities of the language, there is something else that makes the Romanian classic recognizable as a representative of the Banat Bulgarians living in a particular cultural mix.

For example, his disposition to recreate boundless imaginary spaces; on the other hand, his sense of happy tranquillity (most often projected in the dream and therefore unrealised); his love of folklore (of which he collected samples himself) and his ability

¹⁰ Pasim Ivan Mladenov, *Deviated Literature: A Pragmatist Overview*, Sofia, Paradigma, 2011.

¹¹ Romyana Stancheva, *op. cit.*, p. 514.

to write in the spirit of the vernacular; his interest in history and in the origins of the Romanian people as the descendants of the Geto-Daks.¹²

All of the above characteristics (without the origin) are also found in the self-consciousness of the Banat Bulgarian community, which is distinguished by its developed ability to transcend its existence in the world of spirit and word due to periodic migration and the constant threat of extinction. The imaginary space of the domus (“domus”), which gathers abstract knowledge along a path of development (which is also a path of migration for the community, always associated with specific modalities), is a closed immensity designated by a concept such as the “nuclear native”. The threat of the destruction of the homesteading of the small community generates a perpetual drive to remember and narrate the past, which supports the foundations of memory with the active presence of folkloric consciousness, and at the same time, a drive to push away from it in search of modern means of expression. The attachment to the past activates the question of origins, the relationship with Mother Bulgaria, the path of migration, and the personalities who were leaders along this path. The purpose of the journey is always somewhere beyond, metaphorically signified by the various interpretive variations of “home”.

Hyperion” or “The Morning Star” („Luceafărul”) is a philosophical poem-tale. It is equally close to the metaphysical aspirations of the soul and the romantic attachment to the folkloric fairy tale. The problem of the hero’s name is present in the first translation into Bulgarian by Boris Kolev in 1933. The word in Romanian, *Luceafărul*, means the star Evening Star, and in Bulgarian it is feminine. The first translations seek to change the gender and name the character as *Zvezdy* or *Zvezdan*. Similarly, Gergulov’s decision to call him “Zvezdelinko” is in the typical style of the Banat Bulgarian community of using diminutive folk names as formal proper names in extra-documentary usage. In a subsequent edition in 1953, the author used the word “Zvezda” in the form of the name of a “star”. Boris Kolev continued to refine the translation and chose the name “Hyperion,” which replaced the Bulgarian version and remained as a common, but still unsatisfactory name for the translation guild.

The traditional interpretation of the poem in Romania is that Hyperion symbolizes the immortal genius who is in love with an earthly maiden but is doomed never to find love, understood in its human dimension of sharing. In

¹² *Ibid.*

the 1980s. Petru Gorcea¹³ offers another interpretation, in which he emphasizes the role of the heroine, and presents the poem as a transition between fairy tale and idyll. In the initiation, which ends with a wedding, the desire to reconcile the celestial and the terrestrial of the immortality-death antinomy leads. In relation to the interpretation of the role of the translation of the Banat version into English literary language, I point out that the heroine declares her desire for Hyperion to descend to earth and flatly rejects the offer to find immortality by following him. The poem bears the metaphorical desire of translation to "bring down" the classics of Romanian poetry into the limited cultural space of an inherently marginal language, but at the same time to elevate them by attempting to achieve exaltation to the spiritual villages where the original lives. The relationship between the two parties is precisely that third which forges the new meaning. In the process, the Banat English translation emerges as a variant of the recognition and synchronization between cultures.

Hyperion is both a star and an anthropomorphic image in the girl's dream. The space of the dream is where memory as a set of knowledge and experience, the individual's relationship to it, and the interpretations that are the link between the personal and the communal meet. For the Banat Bulgarians, residence in the space of the native language is associated with an afterlife, because it is connected with an exit from the formal life they inhabit in their respective country. For a fuller understanding of the relationship between the afterlife and sleep, as well as the escape of language into sleep, we find evidence in the life story of Peter Dermendzin (1938–2022), the last Bulgarian priest born in Vinga. He studied at the Bulgarian school in Bucharest from 1952 to 1956. He taught in his native village for two years. He entered the seminary in Alba Iulia and graduated in 1963. In 1972 he was imprisoned for propaganda against totalitarianism. He was released in 1980 after insistence by Amnesty International and the Austrian Cardinal Franz König. He emigrated to Canada, where he entered a religious order and returned to Europe after eight years. He served in Munich from 1988 to 2018¹⁴. He was asked which of the languages he preferred, since he knew several. The old priest's answer is categorical: "I still dream in Palkenian". Sleep is the only place and time where he remains alone with himself and can go beyond, into the space where he meets memory through language. What he will take from this side of dreams, what he will

¹³ Petru Mihai Gorcea, *Luceafărul – un mit original*, București, Cartea Românească, 1984, p. 17–22.

¹⁴ Naša glas, br. 17/ 2022, p. 7

bring from this side in the transition between worlds, depends on the ability to read the signs. Language as a home that is only reached in thoughts, in dreams, and memories. That is where the world subsides and peace overwhelms the soul.

The translation of Luceafărul's Banat version into Bulgarian is an invitation to the presence of the Romanian poet Eminescu through the symbolism of Hyperion's dream-image, which is recognised as his own precisely through the proximity of the understanding of the spiritual as dream. The Palkenian version of the poem becomes the edifice of its own domesticity, which functions in the mirror of at least two languages and at least two cultures. The alternative images of the hero are the two alternative sides, the relation between which opens up new directions of interpretation. The name Hyperion misleads that it is always about a man. The 27th stanza, which I present here in its three versions,¹⁵ highlights the differences in perception:

<p>Cobori în jos, luceafăr blând alunecând pe-o rază pătrunde-n casă și în gând și viața-mi luminează.</p>	<p>По някой лъч се ти спуsни, слез, хубавецо кротък, във мойта мисъл проникни, води ме във живота.</p>	<p>Slez dole ti muja zvezda, Pu strelčite spusni se, U kašti vlez, u miseljta, Da ne mi tamnu više!</p>
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The Banat Bulgarian's version remains close to the original and the image of the star that is invited to descend the rays below, into the home and mind of the maiden. In Dimitar Pantelev's version¹⁶, the image is anthropomorphic, and the home is completely missing. Gergulov also sticks to a literal rendering of meaning because of the role of the home as a modus in which the community concentrates not only the material signs of belonging, but also language, storytelling, and connection to a shared spiritual essence. Home is associated with thought and the mind. In the dynamics of changing habitats, crossing borders, and interacting with different cultures, what gives security and stability is not here on earth. It has long since been transported to the disembodied realm of the spirit, where speech gives birth to community life. The illumination of this

¹⁵ Rendering the two Bulgarian versions into English would substantially alter their semantic content therefore, I have chosen to preserve the original verses.

¹⁶ Spaska Kanurkova (ed.), *Romanian Classics (XIX–XX centuries)*, World Classics Library, Sofia, National Culture Publishing House, 1973, p. 105–117.

appropriated space is done by the active presence of spirit (the star, the thought, the idea). This element is present in the communication between the corporeal and the eternal at the invitation of the heroine, who is the bearer of the verbal bridge over which the encounter is to take place. Even in a single stanza taken from the general picture of the work, the specificity of the communication between man and spirit is revealed. The invitation comes from the man who in his dream recalls belonging to the eternal. Ascending the path of the word, the soul meets the light in the descending rays, so that the combination of the two entities occurs in the mental home of memory.

The striving to get closer to the universal in the classical examples of foreign literatures, which are at the same time close, given the education and environment in which the community lives, creates a basis for comparison and recognition. The search is for signs to be included in the infinite semiosis, along whose connecting lines the activation of one's own thought takes place. Charles Peirce explains semiosis with the metaphor of the "bottomless lake" from the bottom of which ideas rise or are raised, which on their way up drag other ideas and reach the surface. The process of awareness as a journey upwards is expressed by the heroine's gaze, longing and call to Hyperion. If it is a purely emotional impulse, a human passion chained to the mundane, it is the "thought," the spirit, the dream. Their encounter awakens the "exhausted mind" ("effete mind") of this memory, intrinsic but sunk beneath the surface of awareness, and directs the potential for the unfolding of the recognition of otherness. The universal sound in what the community creates emerges in the process of recognizing foreign patterns that are close to the elements active in consciousness to be embodied in one's own spiritual space through translation. Admitted to the narrative flow in the periphery for the Romanian culture community of the Bulgarians in Banat through a change of language, they become a stepping stone towards the growth of the periphery into a centre and into material for house-building. The community is also peripheral to Bulgarian culture, but in this case, the closeness is stronger based on the language, which has been preserved since the time of the migration three centuries ago, despite the divergent influences over the years.

The translation of Eminescu's most famous poem, "The Morning Star" into the language of the Bulgarians in Banat is yet another ray along which the links between Romanian and Bulgarian culture run. Each of the two national cultural spheres can exist without this small nucleus, which in a sense is their common periphery. The community's attempts to find its place in the larger cultural

process can only remain in the “bottomless lake” of its own history and culture. There they reside until someone or something lets them into the narrative flow. Then people and works become the signs of attempts at recognition that are transformed and enlivened into a new being, a new modality, one of many on the way to a common spiritual space. The reading of the phenomena in the culture of the Banat Bulgarians in the spirit of such activation of fragments of the common memory is the method that best reflects the dynamic structure of the Banat Bulgarian cultural world. He is a mediator, a medium, a ray along which information with different interpretations flows, and this enriches not only his own sphere, but also the Bulgarian culture of which he is an integral part, still waiting for its full acceptance.

Based on these observations, we can point out the following conclusions:

1) The community of the Bulgarians in Banat, by the specificity of its formation and historical path, is an example of a dynamic cultural environment in the periphery of at least two centres. Through the preservation of language, the memory of the past and history, the particular formative phenomena and the results of interactions, this environment strives to become a centre in itself. It transforms its marginal position into an opportunity to draw on different sources and to transform what it recognises as its own in order to enrich its language and its own cultural treasury.

2) The choice of Eminescu’s emblematic and difficult-to-translate poem is a milestone not only in Gergulov’s translation skills, but also in the development of the language of the community of Banat Bulgarians. Its inclusion in the active spiritual exchange takes place in the matrix of symbols, images, and thought matrices recognizable by the community, in which self-consciousness functions. Concepts such as “home,” “dream,” and “thought” have a specific interpretation in the community that has established its habitat in the world of words.

3) The recognition of Gyuka Gergulov’s translation of the poem “The Morning Star” by the Romanian classic Mihai Eminescu as the twelfth translation into Bulgarian will integrate into the common Bulgarian cultural process the efforts of the community to develop its literary language as a variant of the Bulgarian readings. Future Romanian-to-Bulgarian translations will benefit from tracing the path of all attempts at reading between the two languages. The Banat Bulgarian poet hopes for followers who will dare to follow his example in the last paragraph of the explanatory note to his translation.

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Interviews

“THE RESPONSIBILITY OF CRITICAL
EXAMINATION, THE DUTY OF THINKING
CANNOT BE OUTSOURCED. ...”

AN INTERVIEW WITH GALIN TIHANOV

1. *Professor Tihanov, studying exile and cosmopolitanism, has been pivotal in your academic work. How did you come to this topic?*

When I arrived in England, I certainly thought of myself as someone who had crossed a border—probably in a way more significant than simply visiting a place; I came to think of border-crossing as an enticing experience that truly opens up different perspectives. At that time, I was also very much on the political left. I saw myself as, hopefully, a civilized and not too extreme exponent of Marxism—or, more precisely, post-Marxism. When I was considering what to write about for my dissertation at Oxford, these two factors came together. I was shaped by their confluence. That’s why I became interested in Lukács — a Hungarian-Jewish exile for much of his life, moving between Vienna, Berlin, and Moscow, and returning to Budapest only late in life, still wondering whether he should move back to Vienna one last time. He was a figure of enormous intellectual magnetism on the left — really, along with Gramsci, one of the authentic fathers of neo-Marxism. That’s how Lukács became important to me.

Those were also the years of “high theory”, particularly in Eastern Europe; in the West, it was already on the wane, but in Eastern Europe, it was still very much hierarchically at the top of what you could do in literary studies. And Bakhtin, in that regard, was a very alluring figure because he would open up a vista from which one could see literature beyond its national confines and in a *longue durée* perspective. This is how I arrived at all this. And cosmopolitanism has stayed with me ever since as an intellectual preoccupation. Increasingly, especially in the current climate, it has also become, if you will, a political responsibility. Cosmopolitanism has often been criticized for being too elitist, but I see it as a powerful counterweight to the current deterioration of democracy and liberal values, and to the renewed

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enclosure and retreat from the idea of shared humanity that we are witnessing today—developments whose consequences, I believe, could be very serious. This is the time to defend cosmopolitanism, against the odds, precisely because, in the end, when it comes to the realm of ideals, I don't think there is a value more precious than this sense of shared humanity.

2. *To what extent can the theory of synchronization with Western European literatures and cultures, programmatically adopted by Romanian literature since the 19th century, be verified for other areas in Eastern or Southeastern Europe? In the same vein, how do you relate to Pascale Casanova's theory of „cultural capital” and the „world republic of letters”?*

Pascale Casanova has often been criticized, particularly in the Anglophone West, for being too Eurocentric—and that is true. She makes no bones about it and offers no excuses. I think this is an easy, perhaps even a somewhat facile and not particularly productive way to think of her work. The fact remains that she was the first to formulate the agenda of world literature as one that carries an explicitly sociological charge, while also being embedded in a highly ambitious and wide-ranging study of European literatures. For me, the more difficult problem with Casanova lies in the fact that her model does not quite know what to do with literatures that are neither peripheral nor central in the sense she understands the literary world. What, for example, should we do with Russian literature? It fits neither here nor there on her map. And, astonishingly, she has nothing to say about it. So I think, before we take her to task for overlooking Chinese, Arabic, Persian, or Sanskrit literatures, we should first ask ourselves what she does with the different cultural faces that Europe itself has displayed over time.

In this respect, the idea of synchronization works quite well—particularly in the Balkans and in Eastern Europe. What we need to realize is that this phenomenon—or rather, this discourse and optical effect—of belatedness would make even more sense if we were to acknowledge that it is not restricted to the Balkans or to Eastern Europe. The whole idea of belatedness, just like the idea of small or minor literatures, is the product of a relentless, somewhat crude, and insistent Eurocentrism that has been in operation since roughly the 16th century, but especially since the 18th, formulated and practiced by a core ensemble of cultural elites along the Anglo-French axis. Outside this Eurocentric framework, none of these labels makes any sense.

With this in mind, the discourse of belatedness and synchronization suddenly assumes different dimensions, no longer confined to Eastern Europe or the Balkans. Take Spanish literature, for example. Spanish literature is by no means a “minor” literature. Yet if we read Ernst Robert Curtius’s great classic *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, we find a section on the belatedness of Spanish literature. Why? Vernacular writing in Spanish appears considerably later than in French. And since the Latin Renaissance also manifests itself later there, its impact on Spanish literature is felt only from the 15th century onwards. And some scholars even believe that, in this regard, Spanish literature was not fully integrated into the broader current of Romance literatures until well into the 17th century. But even in the case of Italy, there is a similar shadow of “belatedness” hanging over the national narrative of literary history, because vernacular writing in Italy begins roughly 150 years later than in France. In Germany, too, there has at various junctures of its history been a strong sense of “belatedness”: think of Schiller’s ironic *Xenien* (“Zur Nation euch zu bilden...”), or of Plessner’s *The Belated Nation*. Or take the notion of *absence* or *lack*, which is entirely rooted in this Eurocentric prejudice. Again, there are major literatures that lament the fact that they never had a Renaissance. Russian literature is a very good example.

3. In his seminal essay „*The Tragedy of Central Europe*”, Milan Kundera asserted *the split between the two spheres of Europe. How accurate is his assumption nowadays?*

We need to keep two things in mind here before we can evaluate the current significance of Kundera’s essay. First, the fact that it was written by an exile, and most of the participants in this discussion, of which this essay was a part, were also exiles. Solzhenitsyn, who actually triggered this conversation, maintained that there was no such thing as Central Europe, because Central Europe was merely a legitimate sphere of Soviet influence and therefore also culturally part of the Soviet empire. Kundera and Czesław Miłosz, both exiles like Solzhenitsyn, responded vehemently—as did, in fact, Konrád in Hungary—defending this imagined or real uniqueness of Central Europe. The fact that this essay was written by an exile explains, at least in part, why was Kundera so insistent on foregrounding the notion of cultural uniqueness: in exile, the question “Who am I? What is my identity?” becomes particularly acute, and the compulsion to answer it—and to answer it convincingly—is very palpable. Second, you have

the Soviet Union here, and these East-Central European intellectuals are trying to push back against the idea of Soviet domination as something natural. But the other pole in this encounter is the West—and they are deeply disillusioned also with it, even though their long-term horizon remains Western democracy and re-entering the space of Western political consensus. Still, they speak—particularly Kundera—with this baggage of disappointment, with this feeling of having been let down by the West. The background, of course, is very clear: during the Hungarian uprising against communism in 1956, Europe—and the West more broadly—looked the other way and did not lift a finger to help; nor did they come to the rescue in Czechoslovakia in 1968. All this means that Kundera is eager to carve out Central Europe as a space that is different – in some not insignificant way – from both the oppressor (the Soviet Union) and the betrayer (the West). The question is: has this framework changed in the meantime, and how is Central Europe positioning itself today (think of Hungary, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, to a degree also Poland as countries that are often out of sync with Brussels).

4. *Can 1968 be considered, from an ideological and political point of view, a pivotal year for the synchronization of different European cultural spaces?*

What happened in 1968 was a moment of radicalization. It really pulled French, German, and Italian academic and cultural life into its orbit—less so, of course, university life in Britain. But if we look beyond these three countries, 1968 was truly a generational event: a way of putting a new generation in the driving seat, a generation that sought to distance itself from their parents and, by extension, from Nazism. Make no mistake, 1968 in Germany was not primarily about students wanting to study less Goethe or less classical literature. It was mostly a response to the fact that denazification in Germany had been carried out inconsistently and with limited success. This younger generation—the generation of the children—found itself having to confront its parents, and through them, the recent past of an entire nation, in order to make a new start. In many ways, 1968 was responding to domestic urgencies and problems, but it also had the effect of bringing together the younger generations of at least these three countries in a shared spirit of radicalism. In Eastern Europe, the situation was very different. In Czechoslovakia, for example, people were hoping to address the increasing bureaucratization of communism in a peaceful way, rather than through radical means. Radicalization only began when the Soviet tanks rolled

in. There was, of course, also the “World Festival of Youth and Students”, where young people from various countries, in Europe and beyond, came together in Sofia. Personally, I would not overrate the significance of such events. Beyond Europe, 1968 in China marked the second year of the Cultural Revolution. It was extremely radical—just as radical as in France, Italy, and Germany, where, in the immediate wake of 1968, politicians were abducted and even murdered. From a European perspective, 1968 did play a part in bringing together this new post-war generation. But this radicalism in Germany, France, and Italy was on display not just in 1968: this is a process, and 1968 is merely the focal point. It starts a couple of years earlier, and it takes a few more years to play out.

5. *Under the current digital turn in literary studies, as a professor of comparative literature, how has this development impacted how we read and study literary texts?*

The impact is already visible. AI opens up new possibilities for genuine distant reading, allowing us to process vast corpora of texts—something we were unable to do before. However, it does somewhat displace the traditional humanist agenda of literary studies, pushing it in the direction of information science and discourse analysis—the latter understood purely linguistically. In that sense, we begin to realize that prose and poetry are, in fact, aberrations when we look at how the vast majority of language outputs actually operate, how they are structured and behave (something the Russian Formalists also suspected).

Machine translation will also have an impact on this. I think it will feed the temptation to work with texts secondhand and lend greater legitimacy to that practice. What will happen to comparative literature in this regard? I’m not sure at present, because comparative literature is still grounded in the assumption that texts should be read and studied in the original. This has its benefits, but it also has its limitations, and that rationale is increasingly under pressure for various reasons—some intellectual, others related to how knowledge is produced and consumed, as well as to shrinking university budgets, demographic changes, and also, importantly and to the point, technological advances.

We do need to recognize that AI and this whole digital apparatus for approaching and studying texts are here to stay, and our disciplines will inevitably undergo changes as they embrace these opportunities—while also responding, at times, with due skepticism to what these new technologies offer. For me, the worst and least excusable attitude is to adopt the

posture of a dinosaur who pretends that AI and the digital humanities do not exist. That would be extraordinarily shortsighted and unproductive. At the same time, we do need to cultivate a degree of skepticism—because that’s what intellectuals do, and it’s one of the greatest gifts the humanities can offer: the capacity for critical doubt. What I see increasingly in various projects and grant proposals is that some people seem to believe that digital humanities and AI will find the answers for them—or even think for them. I very much doubt that would be the case. The responsibility of critical examination, the duty of thinking cannot be outsourced. Furthermore, the work of AI is based on various algorithms; refined as they might be, they always produce certain biases and their own limitations and agendas.

If we accept, as we should, the beneficial role of AI and the Digital Humanities in analysing large corpora, we still need to ask: how do we navigate these huge corpora that aspire to exhaustivity? The desire to do justice to previously neglected texts (in their thousands) through quantification is understandable, even commendable, but then crucial methodological questions arise. I think we are by now largely past the whole concept of the canon; that war was lost a long time ago, and we are only now fully coming to terms with this. But because of the gradual and evolutionary nature of knowledge formation in the humanities, the lessons of canon formation are still with us, even as the canon no longer is. And we know that if we place aesthetic criteria at the core—and that’s a very big “if,” whether they should be at the core—but if we agree that aesthetic criteria do matter in how we study literature, we would find that after reading another 2,000 Victorian novels, the answer to the question “Who are the best writers?” is unlikely to have changed in any meaningful way.

Synthesis

“PARTNERSHIPS AMONG ‘PERIPHERALS’ IN
 JOINT RESEARCH PROJECTS
 AND SCHOLARLY PUBLISHING ALSO
 CONTRIBUTE SIGNIFICANTLY TO THE
 DECOLONIZATION OF LITERARY STUDIES”,
 INTERVIEW WITH MARKO JUVAN

1. *Your research interests focus on the dynamics of the synchronization of Literature from Slovenia and other Eastern European literatures. How did you become interested in this subject, and how do you view this dynamic among “peripheral literatures” within the broader context of World literature today?*

Among the existing concepts of world literature, which were all more or less a corollary of globalization and the emerging crisis of the US-American cycle of the global economy, I felt the greatest affinity for Moretti’s and Casanova’s systemic approach, with their emphasis on power asymmetry between leading, influential literatures and those that attempted to follow or challenge models imported from richer and stronger centers. The main reason I began examining the relationships between Slovenian literature and the literary world was my studying literature as a social system and discourse, which required my attention to social actors, media, and institutions involved in literary discourse as a site of dialogue (both interliterary and interdiscursive) and ideological struggle.

Until the late 1990s, I practiced and developed my (rather eclectic, to be honest) combination of systems theory and Bakhtinian dialogism mainly by examining national literature, analyzing it intertextually and placing it in a comparative context. However, somewhat accidental external stimuli forced me to broaden my perspective: I was asked to teach a university course on world literature because of a vacant teaching position (even though I considered myself primarily a literary theorist and historian of modern Slovenian literature), and I was also becoming increasingly connected with the international CompLit

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community. Rather than lecturing on works and authors of the world literary canon, I presented to my students the history and theoretical implications of the idea of world literature itself. These circumstances, in fact, required me to reorient my approach in a way parallel to what Pascale Casanova did as she expanded Bourdieu's concept of the (French) literary field to the world literary space. Another important incentive came from a bilateral project with my Icelandic colleagues, in which we discovered surprising parallels between the Icelandic and Slovenian national poets, even though the literatures in question were too distant in the 19th century to establish any "*rapport de fait*." I attempted to explain this structural parallel by relating both literatures to the system of world literature. I believed that a systems approach to world literature can explain the "foreign policy" of national literatures better and more holistically than the traditional binary comparison between individual national literatures, especially when such comparisons only consider the influence of "leading" literatures on less visible ones.

Today, peripheral and small literatures are gaining some visibility in global academia, as international publishers such as Bloomsbury have begun issuing book series designed to highlight particular, globally lesser-known literatures as "world literature." However, most literary traffic between these literatures is mediated by metropolises as sites of global consecration: a modern author writing in a language of limited diffusion, such as Gospodinov or Cărtărescu, is typically translated into another "small" language, such as Slovenian, only after being recognized in London, Paris, New York, and similar centers, and translated into a world language. To be sure, an important but less visible and more direct interaction between peripheral literatures has existed for decades, partly through state-sponsored literary exchange between linguistically, ideologically, or geographically compatible literatures (within what Đurišin called interliterary communities, e.g., between the communist, Slavic, Central European literatures), and partly through strategies I call "capillary worlding"—international collaboration between small publishers, exchanges between fellow authors, translators, and literary journals from different countries, as well as sociability at literary festivals. I believe that partnerships among "peripherals" in joint research projects and scholarly publishing also contribute significantly to the decolonization of literary studies in smaller or peripheral environments.

2. *Your work primarily examines Slovenian literature within a global framework. How do you balance national and transnational perspectives in your research?*

I must admit that I am not an exception to the prevailing practice of comparative literature in Slovenia, namely its focus on the relationship between our national literature and other European or world literatures. However, this “peripherocentric” orientation, which I critiqued for its underlying cosmopolitan and nationalist ideologies, primarily involved studying the influences of more or less prominent European authors on Slovenian literature. This often led to repeated conclusions about the dependence, belatedness, or, conversely, the ingenious originality of Slovenian writers in their adoption of transnational models. A more holistic approach to world literature as a “universal” system of “particular” literary ecosystems enabled me to analyze Slovenian literature as a token of the widespread type of peripherality—not as a special case or pathological event, as diagnosed in our modern criticism as “Prešeren’s structure” or the “Slovenian cultural syndrome” (i.e., the function of literature as a substitute for the politics of the national movement), but as a “normal” development within the context of European cultural nationalism under conditions of global peripherality.

Moretti’s claim that most literatures are peripheral and that the development of genres within them is the norm, while the supposed originators of genres in global centers are exceptions, was a relief for us, scholars from the peripheries, because we no longer needed to struggle with our respective complexes of dependence, belatedness, or lack of originality. Moreover, the lessons from Bakhtinian dialogism and Lotman’s semiotics of culture encouraged us to reject the prejudice that the periphery cannot produce innovations and aesthetic values capable of transcending their origin.

3. *What makes Slovenian, Romanian, or Hungarian literature “semi-peripheral”? How did you arrive at this classification?*

In my writings, I believe I have never explicitly defined Slovenian, Romanian, or Hungarian literature as semi-peripheral. In fact, I have hesitated to use the term, as seen in my frequent bracketing of the prefix “semi” in expressions like “(semi-)peripheral literatures.” In several contexts, I have referred to East-Central European literatures with this vague and awkward compound, probably because I have been influenced by the more elaborate distinctions

of core, periphery, and semi-periphery in Wallerstein's and Arrighi's model of the economic world-system. In that model, the literary region of East-Central Europe largely overlaps with the economic semi-periphery, while, for example, the colonized global South represents the periphery. However, in the literary world-system, it seems much more difficult to distinguish between peripheral and semi-peripheral literatures, because cultural capital cannot be as easily measured as its economic counterpart. I am currently participating in an international project hosted by the University of Sibiu, under the direction of Galin Tihanov and Andrei Terian, in which the central concept is the notion of sub-periphery, which further complicates the differentiation. To illustrate these differences in an intuitive way, we can say that English and French literatures represent centers, as their influence is global; German, the semi-periphery (with predominantly regional influence); Czech and Polish, the periphery (with a lesser degree of regional influence); while Slovenian, Bulgarian, or Romanian could be classified as sub-periphery because they have remained unacknowledged even regionally. Still, these distinctions remain open to discussion and are by no means unproblematic.

4. *To what extent can the theory of synchronization with Western European literatures and cultures, programmatically adopted by Romanian literature since the 19th century, be verified for other areas in Eastern or Southeastern Europe?*

In the project conducted in Sibiu, Lovinescu's concept of synchronization plays a central role. Lovinescu's core idea—that seemingly less developed peripheral literatures can catch up with more developed centers by engaging in open interaction with the world republic of letters—is original and merits international attention, though it is not entirely unique. It has precursors, contemporaries, and successors in other countries as well, sometimes less theoretically developed, sometimes even more so. For example, the Romantic philologist Matija Čop, encouraged by the talent of France Prešeren (later canonized as the Slovenian national poet), believed that Slovenian literary culture—whose national language was scarcely used in public discourse, education, scholarship, and literature—could reach the universal standard of more developed nations only through a shortcut: cosmopolitan, highly individualized poetry infused with forms, references, and intertexts from classical and modern world literature. Leo Trotsky proposed the concept of

uneven and combined development—which is currently regaining attention in world literature studies thanks to the Warwick Research Centre—to show that significant leaps forward can occur even in the most backward environments. Similarly, the Bulgarian critic Georgi Gačev wrote extensively on the accelerated development of Bulgarian literature, suggesting that the concept applies to nations undergoing decolonization. In fact, Eurochronology, based on the Western meridian of modernity, is increasingly being challenged today. In my recent work on the global student movement of “the long year 1968” and its literary and theoretical output in Paris and Ljubljana, I argued that the local neo-avant-garde, with its conceptualist, ludic, and structuralist traits, represented a synchronization with Paris and its cultural scene, made possible by their shared and contemporaneous involvement in the global event. However, I am now considering a different approach to synchronicity: Bloch’s “contemporaneity of the non-contemporaneous,” in which radical synchronicity serves as the starting point rather than the Western-centric timescale that defines what is considered contemporaneous. Roberto Schwarz’s seminal book *A Master on the Periphery of Capitalism* prompted me to think in this direction. This is the challenge for my future research.

Synthesis

Reviews

Neal Alexander and David Cooper (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Literary Geographies*, Series: Routledge Literature Handbooks, Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge, 2024, 446 p.

The first edition of *The Routledge Handbook of Literary Geographies* (2024), edited by Neal Alexander and David Cooper, stands as the most comprehensive attempt to gather, consolidate, and advance the interdisciplinary exchanges that define literary geography till now. Being not simply a reference book but a meeting ground, the volume contains thirty-seven essays by both established authorities and newer voices. Contributors come from different areas, including literature, geography, and cultural studies, from departments of English literature, as well as sociology and environmental humanities, illustrating what Alexander and Cooper describe as the “interdisciplinarity” of this type of research. Literary critics such as Neal Alexander, Sally Bushell, and Monica Manolescu write alongside literary geographers like Sheila Hones and Giada Peterle, as well as human geographers, including Marc Brosseau, David McLaughlin, and Jon Anderson. Cultural theorists, such as Lynne Pearce and Françoise Král, along with comparative literature experts (e.g., Sten Pultz Moslund and Madhu Krishnan), extend the conversation towards spatial literary studies, diaspora studies, and postcolonial criticism. This collaboration ensures the volume does not just apply geographical concepts to literature, but that it facilitates interactions where methods, questions, and terminology are shared among disciplines. The panoramic structure of the book is articulated in six broad sections spanning from theoretical and methodological issues and various literary case studies to essays on literary geography seen in multiple manners: as a public practice, as an educational activity, as involved in community projects, and as inherent to digital environments. The editors coordinate an ambitious construction that seeks to provide an extensive map while leaving open pathways toward uncharted areas. Fundamentally, Alexander and Cooper hold out against imposing a preestablished order, a rigid hierarchy, or some sort of linearity. Instead, they invite readers to imagine the field using the metaphor of a constellation. As the editors put it, “[...] it may be more useful to conceive of literary geography as a constellation, rather than a spectrum, of interdisciplinary practices; a field of different approaches, which exist both as discrete forms of scholarship and in dynamic relation to one another” (Alexander and Cooper

2024: 6). More than a rhetorical flourish, this analogy considers that a spectrum implies progression, endpoints, and gradations of value, while a constellation, by contrast, means connection without limitations and relation without diminution. The conceit captures a field powered less by consensus and more by its capacity to hold different methods, scales, and voices together. As a result, the corpus prioritizes plurality and dialogue, urging researchers to look not for a single definitive map of literary geography but for shifting patterns within a collective intellectual framework.

The opening section deals with *Critical Methodologies*, grounding literary geography in multiple theoretical frameworks. Marc Brosseau, in *Reading Literature, Reading Geography*, reconsiders his earlier reflections on the entanglement of the two disciplines, pointing out that reading across literature and geography is less about disciplinary annexation than about “reforging the connections” in order “to understand the creation, circulation, and reception of literary texts” (Brosseau 2024: 27). Sheila Hones, in *Relational Literary Geographies*, revisits her influential concept of the text as a “spatial event,” highlighting relationality and co-production. Discussing interspatiality, she considers that it might be “[...] a practical solution to a terminological problem confronting one particular approach within the broad field of literary geography, [...] making it more possible for approaches that work with conventionally separated definitions of the ‘imagined,’ the ‘represented,’ and the ‘real’ to coexist with ways in which the primary emphasis is on the interconnectivity of texts, worlds, and human experience” (Hones 2024: 38). Hayden Lorimer extends, in *Literary Geographies and the Limits of Representation*, his non-representational theory to literary contexts, arguing for attention to practice, performance, and affect rather than representation alone. Jon Anderson deals with *Literary Assemblages*, analyzing “how ‘real’ places and ‘imagined’ texts come together, how they move apart, in what ways, in what contexts, for which actors, and with what consequences” (Anderson 2024: 59). Madhu Krishnan and Penny Cartwright discuss *Postcolonial Literary Geographies*, while Jos Smith’s essay (*Literature, Environment, Geography*) links ecocriticism with literary geography, foregrounding the Anthropocene as an unavoidable horizon for spatial-literary analysis. With *Mapping Literature*, Sara Luchetta closes this section by reflecting on the long and sometimes uneasy history of literary cartography, showing how maps in and of literature are never neutral representations but interpretive practices that expose the tensions between spatial precision and narrative indeterminacy. Collectively, these chapters

establish a methodological toolkit that challenges reductive notions of setting or landscape, accentuating instead transformative mechanisms of spatialization. In a refusal of narrowness, contributors are drawn both from the areas of geography and literary studies in a compositional choice that corresponds with the editors' conviction that the field of "literary geography is elastic enough to include a range of different critical methodologies without seeking some ultimate synthesis or creating a hierarchy among them" (Alexander and Cooper 2024: 1).

The second part, *Keywords*, demonstrates just how central conceptual clarity is for an emerging interdisciplinary field like literary geography. *Space, Place, Landscape, Region, Mobilities, Diaspora* – these six keywords anchor the lexicon of literary geography, each refracted through the lenses of both literature and human geography, and together they chart the conceptual terrain upon which the field's debates about identity, memory, and cultural practice grow. "Drawing inspiration from the work of Raymond Williams," *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (1983), as the ground plan of the *Handbook* informs us, each contribution takes a familiar term and interrogates its layered histories, critical debates, and interpretive potential when read through the double perspective of literature and geography. The result is less a dictionary than a cultural lexicon, one that insists on mobility and contestation rather than fixity.

Peter Merriman opens with "space," situating the concept within geography's long intellectual history – from Newtonian notions of absolute extension to relational and performative understandings shaped by Lefebvre and Massey – and demonstrates how literature not only reflects these shifts but also dramatizes them through narrative form, whether in the fragmented geographies of modernism or the fluid mobilities of contemporary fiction.

According to Sten Pultz Moslund, "Place" is a term whose apparent simplicity belies its theoretical density. Drawing on both phenomenological and socio-cultural approaches, Moslund shows how place is never merely a location on a map but an entanglement of meanings, practices, and attachments: "In literature, the multidimensionality of the place world – with all its rhythms and arhythms – gives shape to events and characters as immersed in a complex and embodied reality" (Moslund 2024: 110). In literary contexts, this becomes vividly apparent in the way novels, like Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), make place simultaneously material, affective, and symbolic. In this way, reading literature becomes a method of accessing how places are lived and imagined, not just how they are measured.

John Wylie's chapter on "landscape" continues this trajectory, pushing readers to see surroundings not as scenery to be described but as a technique of seeing, a cultural form that mediates relations between humans and their environments. In his opinion, "landscape should not be understood simply as an object, topic, or theme for literature," but it is important to consider "the key ways in which the relations between landscape, literature, and writing have been understood by publics, authors, and academics" (Wylie 2024: 113). The author draws on examples ranging from "the popular conception of literary landscape" to contemporary UK-based landscape writing, showing how literature both reproduces and unsettles setting aesthetics.

The keyword "region," taken up by Juha Ridanpää, is particularly suggestive because it bridges literary geography with questions of identity, community, otherness, and cultural boundaries. The chapter "introduces aspects of the historical development of regional geographical research on literature, showing how regional literary geography has combined topics and questions from other fields of geographical research" (Ridanpää 2024: 123).

By identifying a literary mobilities cline – from "thematise," "conceptualise," "contest" to "interrogate," "make visible," "exemplify," and "inform" – Lynne Pearce illustrates how literature not only depicts motion but also actively participates in producing the cultural logics of mobility, reminding us that texts travel, transform, and carry meanings across space much like the people and ideas they represent.

Finally, Françoise Král addresses "diaspora," tracing how diasporic writing dramatizes the entanglement of displacement, memory, and belonging. Diaspora is a term that has migrated across disciplines itself, and Král shows how literature provides insight into diasporic experience: the layering of past and present homelands, the creation of hybrid cultural forms, the tensions between loss and creativity, till the discussion on "atopias and non-places." Whether in the literature of the Middle Passage, novels linked to the Colonial period, or recent diasporic fiction, the spatialities of displacement reveal how identities are forged across distance and rupture, not in spite of them.

The third section of the *Handbook* demonstrates the temporal depth of literary geography by tracing how spatial imaginaries have been produced, reworked, and contested across centuries. Marianne O'Doherty's essay on *Medieval literary geographies* attends to real and hypothetical surroundings, showing how literary texts such as geographical writing or imagined travel narratives, like Christine de Pizan's *Livre du chemin de lonc estude*, configured space as moral and spiritual

terrain. These works remind us that literary geography predates modern notions of cartography, offering instead symbolic mappings that shaped collective understandings of the world and humanity's place within it.

Julie Sanders' chapter on *Geographies of Early Modern English Literatures and the Place of the Stage*, with an accent on some of Shakespeare's plays (*As You Like It*, *The Tempest*, *Pericles*,) continues, in a historical itinerary, with Robert J. Mayhew's study on *The Eighteenth Century. Sites, scales, travels*. The essay is a reconstruction of how the English "domestic novel" (Samuel Richardson, Henry Fielding, Tobias Smollett), the town-country binary, the "narratives of identity, belonging, and otherness," or the imaginative travel writing (Jonathan Swift and Daniel Defoe) participated in reimagining the topology of spatial and epistemic creativeness of the era. The aim is to reveal "the extent to which the profession of literary or creative authorship included within its remit the authoring of travel and geographical writing on the one hand, and, reciprocally, the extent to which factual travel and geographical writings were used in the construction of imaginative literature" (Mayhew 2024: 184).

Penny Bradshaw's chapter on *Romantic Literary Geographies* highlights how mobility and tourism transformed the relationship between literature and place. Discussing themes like *Lakes-inspired prose*, *William Wordsworth's poetics of place*, *Robert Southey and the 'Lake Poet' label*, Bradshaw explains how Romantic writers not only aestheticized landscapes but also helped inaugurate practices of literary tourism. The picturesque and the sublime, two of the period's dominant aesthetic categories, are re-examined here as cultural technologies that mediated both actual travel and the imaginative geographies.

David McLaughlin's analysis in *The Nineteenth Century* shifts attention to recent work in literary geography, which studies authors and works belonging to this era, covering three themes: "representations of space, reading communities, and literature and geography" (Laughlin 2024: 198). The "representation of space," the problem of "community and mobility," and the relation between "literature and geography" situate Victorian literature at a crucial juncture, where narrative both absorbed and refracted the spatial logics of modernity. By presenting Thomas Bruce Wheeler's *The London of Sherlock Holmes* (2011) as a case study, McLaughlin illustrates how literary geography has been applied to canonical texts in order to reconstruct the cultural and dimensional cognitions of the nineteenth-century city.

The later chapters in this section, Neal Alexander's *Literary Geographies of Modernism* and Alexander Beaumont's *Contemporary Literary Geography*, move

toward the present, tracing the place narratives of modernist fragmentation, postwar suburbanization, and twenty-first-century digital readings. From Joyce's Dublin to recent transnational fiction, literature continues to register shifts in dimensional experience – whether through the disorienting montage of modernist form or the globalized, deterritorialized spaces of the XXth-century narrative. The aim is “to understand in what it is that the contemporaneity of this subject matter actually consists” (Beaumont 2024: 226), suggesting that literary geography is always historically situated, yet perpetually in motion, compelled to adapt its tools as new spatial imaginaries emerge.

Perhaps the most peculiar section is the fourth, *Places, Spaces, and Landforms*, which focuses on specific geographical categories. Monica Manolescu explores *The City*, „a vast topic that has long been the subject of interdisciplinary investigation” (Manolescu 2024: 231). She considers it a palimpsest of memory, modernity, and class. The analysis includes a review of the *Representations of New York in Post-2000 American Literature*, taking into consideration the 9/11 attacks theme in novels like Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005) or Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2007). Uma Kothari and Joseph Palis write about *Islands*, from “the imperial gaze and colonial imaginaries” to “postcolonial” approaches, concluding that “these colonialist representations of islands have been subverted and disrupted by the growing recognition of Indigenous Island literatures and the emergence of new postcolonial literary styles” (Kothari and Palis 2024: 249). Major geographical physiographic units, such as *Rivers* (Sarah de Leeuw), *The Sea* (John Brannigan), *Mountains* (Jonathan Westaway), spatial dividers like *Boundaries* (Ana M^a Manzanar Calvo), fictitious geographies as *Utopias* (Jamie Harris), or *Outer Space* (James Kneale) reveal both how landforms are never purely material but also deeply cultural and symbolic, and how the more speculative terrains enrich the field's capacity to traverse scales – from the intimacy of domestic interiors to planetary imaginaries – while keeping the literary text central as both representation and practice.

The essays in Part V of the *Handbook*, grouped under the rubric *Forms and Genres*, turn attention to how spatiality is mediated not only through content but also through the formal properties of different literary modes. Herman Beavers's chapter on *The Novel* examines how African American fiction performs Black geographies, foregrounding the ways narrative form itself can enact resistance to dominant spatial imaginaries, the author's task in this essay being “to determine how the African American novel relies on space and

geography to achieve its aims” (Beavers 2024: 315). James Riding and Olivia Mason’s contribution, *Geo Graphlein: Reimagining Literary Geography*, explores writing as both inscription and movement, stressing imagination, materiality, mobility, creativity, and decoloniality as axes along which literary geography can be rethought. Heather H. Yeung’s text on *Poetry* demonstrates how verse has long been entangled with cartographic practice, reminding us that “the use of the poetic record to map or to seek evidence of ‘real’ places is, in a Western context, no modern conceit, emerging instead with the beginnings of ‘geography’ itself” (Yeung 2024: 336). *Drama and performance* receive attention in Laurence Publicover’s chapter, which points out that theater creates location less through mimetic representation than through embodied processes of staging, noticing that “with an emphasis on scripted drama, its focus is on Western traditions” (Publicover 2024: 347). Finally, Giada Peterle’s essay on *Comics* asks whether the medium can be considered a form of spatial literature, probing “the never-ending question about comics’ literariness” alongside the equally urgent question of comics as graphic geographies. By exploring urban architectures, narrative infrastructures, and the spatial event of reading across panels, Peterle shows how comics can serve as both cartographies and creative research practices, moving beyond the frame to chart new directions in literary geography. Her purpose is “to show that looking at comics from a geoliterary perspective, and at literary geographies from the perspective of comic-based research, constitutes a great opportunity to seed these fields with new objects of study as well as to derive unexplored theoretical and methodological insights” (Peterle 2024: 358). Taken together, these observations remind us that spatiality is not generic-neutral but always refracted through the formal logics, thematic preoccupations, and material affordances of literary genres.

The final section, the sixth, *Beyond the Academy*, highlights the public-facing and experimental dimensions of literary geography, showing how scholarship can unfold as practice, pedagogy, and creative collaboration. Ceri Morgan’s essay on *Murderscapes, Deathscapes, and Workscapes in Québec’s Eastern Townships Fiction* introduces the notion of “immersive literary geographies,” asking how crime and regional fiction construct spaces of violence, labor, and everyday life that readers inhabit affectively as much as imaginatively. The conclusion is that “immersive literary geographies may be distant or proximate, take shape indoors or out, happen in rural regions or urban centres, invite movement and stimulation, or rest and reflection,” but “whatever their form, they can bring together engagements in reading cultures, writing (broadly conceived), places,

and bodies in potentially hopeful ways” (Morgan 2024: 379). Sally Bushell’s chapter, *Experiential Literary Geography in the Mind and in Minecraft*, extends this immersion to virtual and cognitive areas, demonstrating how both mental mapping and digital environments can shape readers’ spatial experience – suggesting that a player exploring a literary world in Minecraft (such as, for example, Robert Louis Stevenson’s well-known novel *Treasure Island*) participates in an act of literary geography no less real than a scholar tracing maps in an archive. Emily Potter and Brigid Magner turn to *Literary River Walking and the Politics of Place-Making* in an Australian context, analyzing how place-making occurs through embodied reading practices in landscape, where walking along a river becomes a political act of reclaiming or contesting regional identity. Finally, David Cooper and Christopher Hanley explore, in *Trees, Texts, and Place-Based Education*, the “pedagogic potential of literary geography,” reflecting on how literary geography can function educationally by connecting students with local ecologies, consequently cultivating environmental awareness and civic engagement. As a whole, this last section exemplifies a shift in the field from textual analysis to participatory practice, demonstrating that literary geography is not confined to the classroom but thrives in community projects and even in digital worlds.

The *Handbook* closes with Tim Cresswell’s *Afterword: Geography and the Creative Writer*, followed by a very well-articulated index of names and terminology. This conclusion offers a relevant reflection on the symbiotic relationship between literature and geography. Cresswell, himself both poet and geographer, underscores that the strength of literary geography lies in its capacity to bridge analytical inquiry with the imaginative and subjective dimensions of experience. As he reminds us, “the tradition of geographies of literature, and more recently, ‘literary geographies’ has its roots in the recognition that geographers could benefit from engaging the worlds of subjectivity and the imagination” (Cresswell 2024: 421). The afterword thus reaffirms the area’s interdisciplinarity, namely that literary geographies are not auxiliary to geography but central to its rebirth, offering new ways of thinking through narrative, emotion, and creativity. In positioning himself explicitly as both critic and creative writer, Cresswell also models how scholarship in this area can remain rigorously analytical while embracing the generative potential of poetic practice. His closing remarks do not attempt to provide closure but rather gesture toward future crossings between disciplines, reminding readers that the “constellation” of literary geography remains open, expanding, and alive.

As a whole, *The Routledge Handbook of Literary Geographies* succeeds not only as a compendium of methods, case studies, and direct practice on literary texts, but also as an intellectual map that remains deliberately unfinished. From Marianne O'Doherty's medieval allegories to Sally Bushell's experiments with Minecraft, from Sten Pultz Moslund's investigation of "place" to Giada Peterle's cartographies of comics, the studies testify to the wide scope and creativity of this type of research. What connects them is precisely what Alexander and Cooper announce in their introduction: literary geography as a "constellation of practices," a field best understood through the shifting alignments of diverse perspectives rather than a single authoritative spectrum. The volume, then, is an invitation for readers to trace their own patterns, to connect disciplines, methods, and texts in ways that illuminate new directions for research. As such, it not only consolidates literary geography but also demonstrates, with clarity and conviction, why its future remains vital.

Cristina Deutsch

Dennis Yi Tenen, *Literary Theory for Robots: How Computers Learned to Write*. NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 2024, 158 p.

Dennis Yi Tenen's *Literary Theory for Robots: How Computers Learned to Write* forms a multi-layered approach to artificial intelligence—not only as a technical phenomenon, but also as a cultural and philosophical one. The study puts forward a more nuanced understanding of AI, one that could withstand the dystopian clichés of robotic supremacy, and which could be grounded in the history of the humanities.

Throughout the book's eight chapters, the author outlines an alternative and fragmentary genealogy of computers, rooted in the much larger historical trajectory in which the symbolic, the linguistic, and the spiritual elements coexist. The history of robotics does not solely begin with computers, but with a whole tradition of human inventions, texts, and aspirations designed to translate thought, encode language, and create automated systems for meaning-making.

The volume addresses some important issues about the relationship between contemporary society and machine learning, which has become capable of interpreting and creating complex semantic structures such as essays, translations, reports, and even literature: "Modern machines read and write. And because they carry language, we readily imagine them capable of higher-order functions like sympathy or sentience. But how do machines grow from handling inert textual matter to living language? Why do they seem to exceed their programming by telling jokes, making complex logical inferences, or writing poetry?" (16). Before being frightened by the dominance of AI in today's world, we must consider that computational intelligence is, ultimately, a human product advanced over a long period of time, through many evolutionary approaches and attainments.

The author discusses two types of intelligence, which he classifies as Aristotelian and Platonic. According to the first view, intelligence is the source of action that comes from reflection, thought, and experience, whereas in the Aristotelian perspective, intelligence is the goal of action. Intelligence is more than what goes on in our own individual minds; it is an interaction between our thinking and the surroundings, tools, and resources. The use of these does not diminish the value of our reasoning, but rather complements it.

Medieval theologian Ramon Llull inspired Francis Bacon and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz to create binary cipher systems; the *wunderkammern* of the German

baroque poets contained mechanical furniture that produced music and poetry by physically combining its parts. In 1668, John Wilkins published *An Essay Towards a Real Character, and a Philosophical Language*, a book in which he envisioned a writing system language that could serve as a translation protocol between different cultures, especially used for economic and commercial motivations. As Dennis Yi Tenen reinforced, the Markov chain, a mathematical model commonly used in contemporary artificial intelligence, developed out of a work on Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*. Ada Lovelace, Lord Byron's daughter, is considered one of the first modern "programmers" who advanced Charles Babbage's Analytical Engine, and a century later, Alan Turing laid the foundations of modern computers. All these walks through cultural memory, considered within the discussion of computers and their evolution, highlight the fact that knowledge has a social and material basis, and is therefore communicable, without having to be thought of in rigid technical and scientific paradigms.

There are two aspects for which I have some reservations. The first is related to the title. The book does not clearly explain the correlation between literary theory as a discipline in the humanities and the history of artificial intelligence associated with it. Literary theory seems to be used as a framework for speculative and otherwise very fascinating insights into human evolution. The second concern is connected with the references to Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy. A broader contextualization is needed to understand the link between the two ancient philosophical thoughts on intelligence with what we call today "artificial intelligence", given the author's use of this dual interpretative grid. These references are only briefly raised *throughout* the book, although they are significant for understanding European thought and its relation to modern culture and literary theory. Nevertheless, the study has some notable strengths: its originality in blending interdisciplinary perspectives, a compelling style that makes complex ideas more accessible to readers, and its creative thinking that encourages us to build upon our reflections about civilization and artificial intelligence in new ways, while clearly keeping the past in mind.

Literary Theory for Robots... sheds light on the view that artificial intelligence is a collaborative labor of which we are often unconsciously unaware—relating to technology as a strictly contemporary and technical asset. Dennis Yi Tenen succeeded in demonstrating that what we refer to as AI is deeply embedded in the long-forgotten history, and in broader questions of ethics, politics, metaphor, and responsibility. In conjunction with this, it is necessary to reflect further upon the connection between knowledge and the implications for the future development of humankind.

Daniela Vizireanu

Gisèle Sapiro and Delia Ungureanu (ed.), *Pascale Casanova's World of Letters and Its Legacies*, Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2022, 213 p.

In the *Introduction* to her *World Republic of Letters* (edition translated by M. B. DeBevoise, published at Harvard University Press, 2004), Pascale Casanova coins a quite compelling phrase, borrowed in its turn from *The Order of Things*, as established by Michel Foucault: that of (literary) *configuration*. Deriving from the Foucauldian notion, what Casanova understands by configuration is “the totality of texts and literary and aesthetic debates with which a particular work of literature enters into relation and resonance, and which forms the true basis for its singularity, its real originality” (p. 3). At first glance, we can immediately identify the sociological approach, *à la* Pierre Bourdieu, which will eventually constitute the main methodological framework that shapes Casanova’s valuable study. But within this *Introduction*, we come across a literary reference that cannot be separated from either the foundation of the *Republic* itself, nor from the variety of studies that will emerge out of it. And that is, as one can already foresee, the Jamesian metaphor of *the figure in the carpet*.

It is no coincidence that the concluding part of this *Introduction* ends with what we may call Casanova’s spur – a spur that militates for a method of obvious interpretation, often mislabelled as an obtuse practice. “[I]t was Henry James who announced”, states Casanova, “the reward of such an enterprise, an approach to the meaning of texts that was both novel and at the same time obvious – so obvious, in fact, that there was not « the smallest reason why it should have been overlooked »” (p. 6). This kind of Jamesian insight not only finds its echoes blaring in *The World Republic of Letters* but can easily be identified throughout the entirety of Casanova’s critical repertoire. Whether we are talking about her sociological reflection-studies on Beckett, Kafka, or the now famous *La langue mondiale. Traduction et domination*, we cannot separate Pascale Casanova’s approach from the one expressed by the mysterious Hugh Vereker – namely, seeing the string itself that is strung on the pearls of *other* literary meanings.

In this light, the recent study dedicated to the French author, *Pascale Casanova's World of Letters and Its Legacies* (2022), edited by Delia Ungureanu and Gisèle Sapiro, does not only put forward to the readers a variety of perspectives regarding Casanova’s revolutionary influence in the field of literary

studies, but also constitutes a tribute, an homage paid to both the critic as a person and the theoretical ideas that completely changed the traditional facet of what was often reductively regarded as approaches specific to the biographical model of critique. We can say without hesitation that the present study follows the Jamesian exhortation that guided Casanova's entire interpretative activity. I believe that the true novelty of this book lies precisely in this aspect – showing that critical and theoretical writing can also be subject to the same angles of artistic interpretation practiced by the author to whom the volume is dedicated.

The volume opens with an introductory insight from the two editors, highlighting Casanova's legacies over the past two decades, characterized by the circulation and influence of the author's ideas across the broad field of world literature. In this first chapter, readers are introduced to the reasoning behind the architecture of this volume. For example, the editors divide the eleven critical essays into two main sections. The first section, which includes the first five essays plus the translated "introductory portrait" by Claire Ducournau, can be seen as a collection of reflections on the influence and revolutionary impact Casanova had on both world literature and the sociology of literature. The second part, consisting of the last five essays, serves as a complement, expanding on the criticism proposed by Pascale Casanova or, in other cases, filling the gaps left open by the author during her lifetime research.

Nevertheless, we must mention a truly valuable work included in this volume, which – like many works by authors such as Casanova – does not easily fit into neat categories. We are referring to the 2008 preface to the pocket edition of *La République mondiale des lettres*, which, translated into English for the first time in this volume by David Damrosch, reveals how the book's circularity impacted the critic personally. In this preface, Casanova states that: "when one enters into the universe one had described, thereby gaining through emotional reactions, contradictions, misunderstandings, and unanticipated objections, [...], in short, by experiencing in practice what it means to enter into international space, it leads one to understand one's own work in a different way. In a sense, I have passed from concept to precept, in Deleuze's terms (p. 34)".

Furthermore, generally speaking, the translation of this preface functions as "a metapreface to the essays that follow" (p. 6). In this regard, we can talk about a symbiosis between *concept* and *precept*, as presented by Casanova in the previous quote, which we can identify in each essay included in this volume, whether used as an interpretative tool to further develop one's own analysis or, in some cases, questioned from the ground up.

Although the editors divide the entire volume into two main parts, it is impossible not to notice how fluidly these two distinct sections communicate with each other, both structurally and thematically. For instance, the essays that focus on translation from the first part (such as those by Răduță and Damrosch), even though they are concerned with the reception of Casanova's works in diverse literary spaces (taking diversity in the true sense of the term, given that Damrosch discusses the reception of the translation in a central academical space, namely the Anglo-American one, while Răduță focuses on peripheral editorial literary spaces like those in Romania, Serbia, and Slovenia), they do not shy away from showcasing the different modes of mediation and reasoning through which a translation enters a foreign cultural space. Building on this, the essay from the second part, dedicated to translation and written by Tiphaine Samoyault, precisely aims to legitimize what the author calls "a theory of relay translation" – a theory that does not aim for a single directionality of linguistic conversion but instead promotes a "pluralizing" view of the "modes of mediation" (p. 117) that materialize the final product within the host-culture.

The same fluency of communication can also be traced in essays that – more or less openly – address the issue of exile or a kind of uprooting. Although they differ in their methodological and demonstrative approaches to exile's role in Casanova's work, the contributions by Laurent Jeanpierre and Thirthankar Chakraborty, in the first part, resonate with the theoretical approach proposed by Jing Tsu in the second part of the volume. Jeanpierre notes that "[f]or Casanova, exiled writers are therefore more conscious than others and thus have a better chance to express the structure of the world literary field" (p. 89), and Chakraborty's study confirms this statement by analyzing Samuel Beckett's case within Casanova's body of work, also closely examining Beckett's correspondence. From this perspective, while exploring contemporary Chinese literature, Jing Tsu is entirely correct in pointing out that "[e]pistolary writings create a form of syncretized literary space that by definition travel a distance; [...]. Letters are a spatializing form of writing, yet they have long been overlooked in the world literary space" (p. 179).

These are just a few of the theoretical topics touched upon by the authors who contribute to the completeness of this volume. I would also like to mention the novelty found in Michiel Leezenberg's essay, which applies Casanova's operational concepts (such as *literary domination*) analytically, not in opposition, but rather "as a continuation and extension" (p. 149), in order to reveal the existence of a non-Eurocentric pre-modern transnational

literary field. The same analytical approach to Casanova's theories can be found in Tristan Leperlier's study, which expands a typology of *linguistic areas* by closely examining Arabophone and Francophone Algerian writers. This contrasts with the "Herderian congruence between nation and language" (p. 129), which perpetuates an indubitable kind of symbolic violence. Speaking of symbolic violence, Madeline Bedecarré's study cannot be ignored. The author demonstrates how the *Prix des Cinq Continents* institution not only favors the Francophone center over the French-speaking margins or peripheries, but also "reveals the extent to which the French state sees literature as a force for reshaping a formerly colonial relationship" (p. 211).

Looking at this volume as a whole, it makes a considerable contribution to clarifying and deepening the theoretical concepts that Pascale Casanova left as a legacy to literary studies. Additionally, works such as Claire Ducournau's introductory portrait, Laurent Jeanpierre's essay, and David Damrosch's interpretations, often bring Pascale Casanova the person to the forefront for readers, unravelling Ariadne's thread through the connections they establish between the events from her personal life and her revealing theories. What I find truly innovative about the entire volume is that the editorial vision has remained faithful to Casanova's critical project. Whether considered independently or in connection with each other, each of these essays represents a new *configuration* of the act of interpreting, of thinking – in short, every study included offers a new angle from which to gaze at endless significations of *the figure in the carpet*.

Darius Bumbar

Bruce Lincoln, *Secrets, Lies and Consequences. A great Scholar's Hidden Past and His Protege's Unsolved Murder*, Oxford University Press, 2023, [*Secrete, minciuni și consecințe. Trecutul ascuns al unui mare savant și asasinarea discipolului său*, Traduction de l'anglais par Sorana Lupu, Iași : Polirom, 2024].

L'épisode *légionnaire* de la biographie de Mircea Eliade suscitera certainement d'autres exercices éditoriaux dans lesquels des auteurs plus ou moins connus tenteront d'émettre des verdicts qui, n'étant pas validés par la présence d'éléments tangibles et concrets, viendront s'ajouter à la liste des théories du complot.

Fictionnaliser sur la base de sources secondaires, prises comme des verdicts certains, lorsqu'on s'engage dans une entreprise de l'ampleur académique du professeur Bruce Lincoln, ne peut manquer d'impliquer la littérisation de la réalité, l'interprétation des textes. La bibliographie consistante consultée, méticuleusement ajoutée en fin de volume, avec des notes et des annotations honorent l'auteur. Avec une remarque: l'étude de recherche, ayant l'apparence d'un *portrait d'auteur* – dans ce cas Mircea Eliade – signifie travailler directement sur des documents « incriminants », ce qui est certainement différent de l'interprétation herméneutique-littéraire des contextes, des opinions, des secondes et troisièmes sources, en gardant une équidistance correcte, sans avancer des suppositions subjectives, qui pourraient être livrées / privilégiées seulement si le travail n'était pas un travail scientifique, mais littéraire, un roman *policier*.

Bruce Lincoln étaye son point de vue sur Eliade-Légionnaire en puisant dans des sources secondaires, en systématisant ce qui a été dit / publié (également sous forme de théories non étayées). Le contenu se résume à un commentaire de textes, au-delà de ce que l'auteur a voulu dire (Eliade dans les lettres, par exemple) et à un pliage sur des contextes ou la création de contextes dans lesquels s'insérer, en fin de compte, un point de vue.

C'est très délicat de fictionnaliser sur la base de contextes / textes / sources secondaires pour formuler un certain verdict. Par exemple, à la page 43 (en citant indirectement de *Jurnalul [Le journal]* de Mihail Sebastian), Bruce Lincoln conclut: „On ne sait pas exactement quand Eliade a apporté un soutien total et actif à la Légion. Certains chercheurs pensent qu'il y a des traces de son affiliation officielle dès 1934, tandis que les services de sécurité roumains parlent de 1935, sans citer de preuve concrète.” Or, aux pages 121–122: « Les questions

de Culianu révèlent des intérêts, des objectifs et des tactiques divergents, ce qui rend le texte difficile à interpréter [...]. Je pense qu'il est préférable de considérer que toutes les contradictions et les ambiguïtés du texte reflètent l'ambivalence d'un auteur qui admirait son interlocuteur, lui était dévoué et se sentait dépendant de lui, mais qui était en même temps envieux, ambitieux et fatigué d'être le *disciple crétin qui bravait toutes sortes de dangers pour le rencontrer, mais à qui on ne laissait aucun espace pour le critiquer.* » Ou encore la spéculation sur la présence du Dr Alexandru (Alexander) Ronnet au domicile de la famille Eliade: on avance l'idée que Ronnet était dans l'entourage d'Eliade pour lui rappeler l'existence des légionnaires. « Je sais que le maître tenait un journal. Il avait aussi un carnet de notes très personnelles et politiques. Je n'en connais pas les détails », précise M. Ronnet (p. 133). Plus loin, aux pages 136–137 – « Furieuse que Ricketts ait évoqué l'implication de Mircea dans la Légion, Mme Eliade a déclaré qu'elle ferait tout son possible pour empêcher la publication du livre et a persuadé les éditeurs de Macmillan de le rejeter, en menaçant peut-être d'intenter une action en justice. »

Outre les théories avancées à propos de l'assassinat de Ioan Petru Culianu, un disciple d'Eliade qui voulait, entre autres, publier un livre sur le maître dans lequel il aborderait également le problème des légionnaires – selon lesquelles l'épisode de la mort a été perpétré par un assassin de la Sécurité (la cause étant les articles publiés par Culianu, qui critiquaient le nouveau régime en Roumanie après 1989) (Ted Anton, *Eros, magie și asasinarea profesorului Culianu*, traduction par Cristina Felea, préface par Andrei Oisteanu, Polirom, Iași, 2005), puis une autre: par un légionnaire basé aux États-Unis (parce que I. P. Culianu les a ridiculisés et les a comparés au Ku Klux-Klan) (Moshe Idel, *Mircea Eliade, de la magie la mit*, traduction par Maria-Magdalena Angheliescu, Polirom, Iași, 2014), puis: un KGB-iste (en raison de l'interview dans revista 22, dans laquelle Culianu a parlé à Gabriela Adameșteanu des stratégies / de l'implication du KGB dans les révolutions d'Europe de l'Est) – Lincoln propose une autre hypothèse: Christinel Eliade est derrière l'assassinat, indirectement, avec l'aide d'un ami proche qui se serait plaint de l'insistance de Culianu à traiter/publier l'épisode des légionnaires dans son livre sur Eliade.

La parution du volume du professeur Lincoln (en anglais et en roumain) n'a pas manqué de susciter des réactions. L'intervention de Dorin David – une chronique sur la parution de l'édition anglaise – dans laquelle l'auteur écrit,

entre autres: « On parle beaucoup de la *rhinocérisation* et de la pièce de Ionescu en relation avec les adhésions des intellectuels de l'entre-deux-guerres, mais il ne faut pas oublier que cette pièce est une œuvre littéraire – précieuse, importante, mais pas moins littéraire. Il en va de même pour les témoignages et les déclarations, y compris les journaux intimes, en particulier ceux qui sont édités avant publication et qui n'apparaissent pas *in extenso* – un facsimilé serait encore mieux. Mais même ainsi, ils ne contiennent que des interprétations et des descriptions personnelles des faits, qui peuvent être exactes ou imaginaires, mais qui n'en sont pas moins importantes. Il en va de même pour la médecine légale: en l'absence de preuves matérielles, le *dossier* est (également) constitué à partir de déclarations et d'interprétations. Mais, tout comme les faits, les articles sont la preuve de ce que leur auteur croyait lorsqu'il les a écrits, et le fait qu'ils restent publiés dans les journaux et les magazines est essentiel pour une recherche objective » (<https://www.observatorcultural.ro/articol/citeva-ginduri-despre-secrete-minciuni-si-consecinte/>) Correct. Idéalisé. Mais ne confondons pas le fait que l'analyse d'un texte, comme les plaidoiries des magistrats au tribunal, peut glisser en faveur de l'auteur d'un autre texte, en fonction de la probité certifiée par les ancrages réels sur lesquels le discours est construit. Puis, à la fin de son intervention, Dorin David a posé une question au Professeur Sorin Alexandrescu, légataire de l'œuvre de Mircea Eliade: « a demandé Bruce Lincoln l'autorisation de publier les articles d'Eliade en anglais, ce qu'il a refusé. Pourquoi? » (<https://www.observatorcultural.ro/articol/citeva-ginduri-despre-secrete-minciuni-si-consecinte/>) Dans un article, Sorin Alexandrescu lui répond: « Comme je n'ai pas encore lu l'ouvrage de Bruce Lincoln et qu'il ne me l'a pas envoyé, je ne peux pas en parler ici dans son ensemble, mais je me réfère uniquement aux affirmations qu'il a faites dans son courrier électronique, ainsi qu'aux questions posées dans l'*Observateur culturel* par Dorin David. L'article émet de nombreuses hypothèses, à partir desquelles il glisse parfois vers des conclusions factices ou des insinuations, comme celles concernant Christinel Eliade. A son sujet, comme à celui d'autres personnes, l'auteur passe ainsi de l'expression « Christinel, semble-t-il, n'acceptait pas l'idée que... » à une insinuation sans fondement : « le fait qu'elle ait été maintenue dans le brouillard l'a mise en colère... » (p. 9, colonne 1). Passant outre l'irrévérence de l'expression, je dirais que la première phrase étant incertaine, la conclusion de la deuxième phrase, qui la suit, ne peut être, me semble-t-il, aucunement certaine. De même, le fait qu'Eliade se soit intéressé aux légionnaires à un moment donné ne permet pas nécessairement de conclure qu'il est resté longtemps leur

« suiveur », et encore moins qu'il a été actif dans ce sens. Ces généralisations forcées ne sont pas sans danger: nous avons tous eu dans notre jeunesse des « convictions » que nous avons oubliées à l'âge adulte! Mais Dorin David, heureusement, fait aussi une remarque sérieuse dans ce sens, à propos de l'« adhésion légionnaire », en s'interrogeant à juste titre sur les points suivants: « combien de pour cent de l'ensemble des œuvres d'Eliade représentent ses propos pro-légionnaires...? Une question juste, à laquelle la réponse suggérée est: évidemment, le pourcentage est minime! » (<https://www.observatorcultural.ro/articol/raspuns-citorva-ginduri-de-dorin-david-despre-mircea-eliade/>)

Il est vrai que dans la configuration intellectuelle et biographique de Mircea Eliade, il y a eu un épisode « légionnaire », avec les guillemets qui s'imposent. Il y a eu des opinions. Les textes « incriminés » ont été publiés depuis longtemps dans des volumes (Mircea Eliade, *Textele „legionare” sau despre „românism”*, Dacia, Cluj-Napoca, 2001), pour le lecteur qui veut se faire une impression ronde, correcte, équidistante de cet épisode biographique. La fureur de ceux (« détracteurs ») qui ont exagéré cet épisode, le portant à un degré qui n'a rien à voir avec la réalité, en fictionnalisant, *supposant*, émettant des théories et des affirmations auxquelles l'*accusé* ne peut plus répondre (*contre-attaque*), trouve son explication dans ce qui se passe, globalement, avec tout ce qui signifie *exposition, validation, reconnaissance* – dans le cadre construit autour de tout événement, propulsé/exagéré/cosmétisé par des moyens plus ou moins vérifiables. L'espace académique, comme on a précisé, a été aussi *touché*: le *rating* d'un auteur est garanti plus que la formulation d'un point de vue est plus effervescent (*avec* ou *sans* validation scientifique), ou qui *démolit* / déconstruit des images / théories préétablies.

L'approche du professeur Lincoln est sans aucun doute vigoureuse, blindée de sources bibliographiques, méticuleusement construite. Ce qui nuit à sa validation en tant que certitude académique, comme le suppose d'emblée cette approche éditoriale, ce sont les trop nombreux passages où l'on *suppose* des lacunes, où l'on fictionne la réalité, où l'on construit un discours dans des espaces où il n'y a pas de preuves/ancrages pour valider les points de vue. Déclarations et interprétations. Dans ce cas, l'interprétation romancée de certains contextes, l'herméneutique, peut cependant se substituer aux jugements sous l'aura d'un certain verdict, ou bien nous restons dans le domaine du fictif, dans *l'apparence*? Et puis on revient, *again and again*, au cas Eliade?

Il est certain que l'exercice éditorial de Bruce Lincoln ne sera pas le dernier de la série de ceux qui traiteront de manière éditoriale de l'épisode *légionnaire*

inflammatoire de la biographie de Mircea Eliade. Mais au-delà de toutes *les preuves*, au-delà de toutes les théories du complot, au-delà de toutes les suppositions et de toutes les preuves certaines qui ordonnent ce moment du destin d'un citoyen d'envergure universelle, ce qui restera indestructible sera certainement l'œuvre d'un Maître qui, en tant que pionnier, a tracé des trajectoires indéniables dans les domaines où il s'est illustré. Le temps nous montrera ce que d'autres feront là où il s'est arrêté.

Et un point final: Mircea Eliade, journal, 20 janvier 1977 : « J'ai été très touché de lire le poème que Bruce Lincoln, un de mes anciens étudiants, devenu depuis deux ans moi assistant, a laissé sur mon bureau avant de partir. Qu' on me permette d' en citer ici un extrait: *In a wood-paneled study atop the grey/ Seminary, a man nearing seventy sits/ At his desk. Laden shelves sag under polyglot/ Volumes; the excess spills to tables,/ Chairs and floor while folder-waves flow/ Across the room. For a while he reads,/ Puffs pipe, twirls letterknife,/ Chews an imported biscuit. Many/ Secrets of the Whare-wananga are his.../ Likewise Midewewin, Djunggawon,/ Ngakola and more; Veda, Eddas, and/ Soft shaman' s songs. Possessing all Zalmoxis taught,/ He muses, writes, chats with the occasional/ Visitor./ Wisdom passed down from his fathers.../ Wisdom passed on to his sons* (Bruce Lincoln, August 19, 1976) » (Mircea Eliade, *Fragments d' un journal. 1970-1985*, II, traduit du roumain par C. Grigoresco, Paris, Éditions Gallimard, 1981, p. 311-312).

Cristina Scarlat