

NINETEENTH CENTURY ROMANIAN PUBLIC SPACE: THE FINAL FRONTIER FOR WOMEN?

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Abstract: “Far from being unitary or monolithic or autonomous things, cultures actually assume more <foreign> elements, alterities, differences, than they consciously exclude.” (Said 15). Building on gender studies discourse, the present paper builds on Said’s view of cultural experiences at large as stated in the quotation above and attempts to illustrate what was at stake in the (trans)cultural relationship between space, place and textuality in the making of the Romanian romantic novel.

Keywords: gender roles, alterity, modernity, identity construction, spatiality, romantic novel.

Mid-nineteenth century Romanian culture provides exemplary proof that this postcolonial interpretation of literature needs to be fully adopted by contemporary literary scholars, as the phenomenon of the novel was “foreign” *par excellence* in Romania from the very outset, being imported (and eventually translated and adapted) from French culture. My paper sets out to offer an analysis of how the impressive body of evidence regarding women’s reception of mid-nineteenth-century novels played a crucial role in shaping the new Romanian perception of spatiality. For this purpose, I have taken into account research in the field which situates the origins of the early-modern Romanian novel roughly between 1840 and 1865, where the 1840s witnessed the lead-up to the 1848 Modern Revolution in Romania and the 1860s symbolically mark the birth of the very first Romanian literary-critical institution, the *Junimea* literary society, and its publication, *Convorbiri literare* [*Literary Debates*]. Taking into consideration the fact that

the whole importing-translating-adapting process is an intricate phenomenon, I have further grounded my argumentation on the extensive research into both the early to mid-nineteenth century romance novels' audience and to their production, from translations to the *domestication* of the imported formula, which has been carried by Romanian scholars.

The setting of the reception of French influence in Romania is well known. From Pompiliu Eliade's *De l'influence française sur l'esprit public en Roumanie: Les Origines* (1889) [*The French Influence over the Public Spirit in Romania. The Origins. A Study of the Condition of Romanian Society at the Time of the Phanariot Rulers*] onwards it has been established that the replacement of the Oriental influence that held sway in the first part of the nineteenth century with French influence within a few decades was the effect of a combination of factors. Towards the end of the eighteenth century, the elite had rediscovered the ideas of Latinity and of national rebirth; this was based on the seismic effects of the French Revolution, and was further extended by the 1848 Revolution. In addition, the beginning of the nineteenth century witnessed a fashion among the rich for sending their offspring to study in France, and the number of Romanian students there increased exponentially. Moreover, as Eliade explains, the history of French influence on Romanian culture goes back beyond this period, via the French lifestyle introduced to the Romanian aristocracy by the Tzarist armies and especially by the gallant officers who socialised at Court and became involved with local beauties. French novels became the preferred genre, and among them *La Nouvelle Héloïse* [*The New Héloïse*], *Paul et Virginie* [*Paul and Virginie*], *Die Leiden des Jungen Werthers* [*The Sufferance of Young Werther*] (in a French version), probably Richardson's works, so popular at the time, and those of Restif de la Bretonne and Mme de Staël were the most common in private libraries. Regarding the popularity of *Corinne* (Madame de Staël, 1807), an interesting detail is revealed by Kosmali, a foreign traveller from the end of the Phanariot period. He recorded that he had found Madame de Staël's book in an aristocratic home, annotated by the mistress of the house, a devotee of romantic literature ; also, a certain Marieta Cantacuzino, a young woman from the aristocracy, had in her personal library *La vie et les amours du chevalier du Faublas* [*The Life and Love of Faublas the Knight*] (14 volumes!) before 1821 (Kosmali qtd. in Xenopol 209-210), thus showing that women's reading habits had become modern long before the official modernization brought about by the men having their political revolution in 1848. Moreover, it is a documented fact that women took the

lead in giving up Turkish Ottoman dress and embracing European styles; this took place as early as the late eighteenth century.

Consequently, analysis of the early-modern Romanian novel from a gender perspective must not ignore the mediating, and catalyzing role which translations played in Romanian culture, under the influence of French culture. Here, as elsewhere, the defenders of public morality raged against the dangerous new reading practices. The only difference is that in the Romanian culture the reason for rejecting the so-called *belle litterature* was not triggered by aesthetic reasons, as happened, for example, in the case of French Classicism. In our case, the reason lay purely in morality, but the effects were the same. Consequently, due to very lax contemporary notions of intellectual property and to a concern not to frighten the reader with unusual ideas, translators would frequently and blatantly tamper with the text: they would suppress details, soften the tone, and add their own commentaries and sometimes entire passages to the “translated” text, because: “... the novel was suspected of circulating subversive ideas, French ones in particular, of propagating a dubious morality, triggering, eventually, the deconstruction of traditions and stirring of senses.” (Cornea, *Translators and Translations* 60)

Translators as intermediaries are very much aware of their audacity: all Romanian versions are, with no exceptions, entirely wholesome, with their moralizing discourses and politically correct attitudes towards social hierarchy and moral precepts. Starting from the existing research in the field and limiting the scope of my research to the 1840-1865 period, I have managed to bring to light the following statistical data: 92 translated novels; 14 women translators; 26 foreign novels written by female authors translated into Romanian; 5 novels written by foreign women authors translated by Romanian women. The fact that my own statistics reveal that out of the impressive body of translators (92) active between 1840 and 1865 only 14 were women can be explained when we remember that men were viewed as the defenders of morality.

However, even though female translation activity (regarded as production) is meagre in comparison to male, when we look at it from the perspective of reception things are completely different. Once established, this type of literature consumption becomes the dominant fashion, as was constantly pointed out both in the period itself and subsequently. For instance, as early as the 1840s Alecu Russo reveals how powerfully this (female) fashion for reading romances had spread through the less exalted strata of society: “Following the elegant and fashionable women,

the second class aristocracy will only speak of Balzac and Soulie, Lamartine and Hugo, Kock and Dumas; especially Paul de Kock—they adore”. (73)

Referring to the same phenomenon, and basing his conclusions on extensive research into the phenomenon of reception, Paul Cornea unequivocally asserts that:

“After 1860 ... *women represent a significant percent that stimulates translations* [emphasis mine] from widely accessible novels, namely ‘romances’” (Cornea, *The Rule* 282)

According to Cornea, the proportion of novels translated compared with other genres reveals the ever-increasing importance the novel gained around the 1860s: translations of French novels had increased by 400% compared to 1840, and by 250% compared to 1850.

However, the connection between women and romances as a major vector of spatial modernity is a complex one, especially given the negative reactions to their reading habits. If we apply it to our study at this point, Said’s contrapuntal reading theory (*Culture and Imperialism*, 1994) allows a better understanding of this oxymoronic relationship between women and the novel. As Said explains “The point is that contrapuntal reading must take account of both processes, that of imperialism and that of resistance to it”. Within this context, love as a theme and preoccupation plays a subversive role, which women perceived (often unconsciously) as a breach carved into the traditional system of values, which no longer corresponded to their (and the overall society’s, for that matter) underlying need for emancipation. Women and their lifestyle, especially their reading practices, were operating as a phenomenon of alterity, to use Virgil Nemoianu’s terms (see *A Theory of the Secondary*), something which, he claims: “... appears as a guiding nucleus, that ... attracts incipient noise and starts building a world with a certain structure.” (172) Demand from the female public stimulated the translation of romance novels and eventually the production of home-grown versions, which came as a natural solution to satisfy both the censorship imposed by traditional morality and the public. The early Romanian novels are thus grounded on a dual foundation: written by men, read by women, arguing against women’s emancipation and yet propagating it. Consequently, the image of modern women constantly overlapped with that of the novel, a state of affairs which located the fight for gender dominance in the agora of literature; this is revealed by the fact that the “devastating” consequences of women’s reading practices became a topos in the early Romanian novel, transgressing reality and becoming a recurrent literary theme, involving issues such as **what women should read** and above all **who** should decide what they should read. Here is the

voice of a male writer put into the mouth of a protagonist in one of the early novels: “You’d rather read French romances, claiming that this is true reading and, perhaps, to learn how to fulfil your duties as mistresses. But this is hilarious! You are not even able to take advantage of this situation! I know you: you even lack the ability of loving properly!” (Kogălniceanu 27)

As we may observe, reading was constantly linked to loving, and it is therefore not far-fetched to understand these early romances as a codified discourse speaking about the new phenomenology of love, where the text might be romance, but its sub-text was eroticism and sexuality. **Therefore**, within the early Romanian novel we can detect this phenomenon of alterity which triggered an intrinsic erosion of the gender roles in the couple, with irreversible consequences: from the display of feminine and masculine bodies, to new gender roles **and a reorganizing of space itself around this gender shift**. The imported mentality changed the status quo, swiftly swallowed up what had existed before and produced, within a very short time, a new content: new values, new morality. One narrator sheds light on this “underground” revolution triggered by women’s emancipation when he complains that women’s behaviour was working to the detriment of native Romanian literature: “They will not speak in their beautiful Romanian language; they write, speak, read everything in a foreign language.” (Pantazi 145) Consequently, research into the mechanics of women’s demands for romance novels in particular reveals new connotations of the context of Romanian modernity, thus perfectly illustrating Pierre Bourdieu’s theory which postulates that both reading and writing involve aspects which display the power conflict between individuals, as long as any book contains within itself the potential to meet the reader’s horizon of expectation. Within this context, my conclusion is that via the imported romances, the erotic legacy of Western courtly love penetrated the heavy traditional Eastern mentality with a conquering force, consequently coming to the forefront in the daily life of the aristocracy, and, in a few decades, of the whole of the bourgeoisie, all due to the phenomenon of women’s *erwartungshorizont*.

Once secondary social players, women came to the forefront of modern existence, with their *frivolous* preoccupations: reading romances, erotic display, love for luxury and entertaining, proposing their own version of modernity: a local adaptation of the broader network of mentalities emerging in the entire modern European space. Women’s reading practices thus brought about in mid-nineteenth century Romanian culture what Anthony Giddens calls the

European “transformation of intimacy” (I am referring here to Anthony Giddens’ *The Transformation of Intimacy. Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies* of 1992 in which he analyses the wider context of the changes which occurred in gender relations in Europe in the nineteenth century, as a result of the evolution of modern capitalism and democratic societies).

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