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Hybrid Geographies of Global Genres: The Global Space in the Romanian Modern Novel

Abstract: My paper aims to investigate an early phase of the globalization phenomenon as it has manifested in a specific peripheral space, attempting to map, by means of both close and distant reading, how the internalization processes have been mirrored in the modern Romanian novel. The scope of my research revolves around the responses that Romanian literature – a peripheral, minor literature – has had towards transnational or global models, and how the novelistic production of the aforementioned timeframe has metabolised and illustrated the foreign input in our culture. The theoretical framework of the present

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« Enfin, de deux heures à cinq heures, sa vie atteint à l'apogée, il donne sa grande représentation GRATIS. Ses trois mille boutiques scintillent, et le grand poème de l'étalage chante ses strophes de couleurs depuis la Madeleine jusqu'à la porte Saint-Denis » (Honoré de Balzac, Histoire et physiologie des boulevards de Paris. De la Madeleine à la Bastille)

Introduction:

Theoretical Framework

“Literature is the home of nonstandard space and time”¹, Wai Chee Dimock declares in her already famous book – *Through Other Continents. American Literature across Deep Time* – a volume that has garnered its fair share of praise, but also criticism. Drawing on her work, my own research has worked with genre theory, especially the novel and its diverse pool of subgenres. Her views on the geography of literary genres have more than once proven functional in transnational endeavors, and I quote two of her famous definitions here, the first one stating that “the epic seems

always to have been a genre spurred by cultural contact (...) the proximity of the alien is its genetic condition”², while the second one addresses the global character of the novel, by noting that

its [the novel’s] frame is indeed global, but the global here, bearing the compass of time, enfolds rather than erases its scalar opposite. Isabel’s suffering [referring to the female character from Henry James’s *The portrait of a lady*], trivially unremarkable, is vividly before us because it is both smaller and larger than the jurisdictional plane of the nation. The prenatal and the subnational come together here to create an irregular beat, a fractal loop both above and below the nation’s linear cross-section³.

In the field of *World Literature*, these assessments are generated by a very similar way of understanding the new paradigm to David Damrosch’s system of definitions⁴. *World Literature* is therefore an inherent feature of a literary product, a feature that can provoke the intense dissemination of the product, in original or in translation. I do not state here that the two authors come to the same conclusions, but rather that, in terms of theoretical orientation, they depart, more or less, from the same place. However, both Dimock’s and Damrosch’s investigations were met, almost simultaneously, with a sort of counter-canonical responses, from Franco Moretti⁵ to the Warwick Research Collective⁶, authors that have built on Marxist ideas while developing their theoretical and methodological systems on *World Literature*. We can therefore already see the formation of

a dichotomist structure inside this still ongoing field of studies. Same goes to the so-called global turn, which departs from both *World Literature* and Planetary Studies⁷. The term *global*, and I quote from WReC’s *Combined and Uneven Development*,

is typically deployed in discussion of social processes bearing on the modes of production, circulation and reception of literature (and culture, more generally) – hence the significance accorded, as in cultural studies generally, to such concepts as transnationalism, deterritorialisation, diaspora, homogenisation, (post-)modernity, cosmopolitanism, citizenship, and so on⁸.

Building on these aforementioned theoretical assumptions and methodological frameworks, my research focuses on the Romanian modern novel as *World Literature*. Referring to my title, I shall note that by *global genre* I mean to identify the novel as a transnational cultural object, shaped, in terms of form, by different developmental phases of the societies, the ideologies and the market dynamics, while by *hybrid geography* I mean to argue that every written novel is a product of foreign contaminations, that it always has a false geography, one that gathers subjective inputs of its author, that every national occurrence bears within an intricate weave of local ideologies and foreign models. Synthetically put, the novel is both *global* (in form, as a genre) and *worldly* (in its local manifestations and in individual productions). I will therefore make use, in further analysis, of Dimock’s idea of novel as concomitantly prenatal and subnational, all the while owing more to the Marxist

perspectives on *World Literature* above mentioned.

I am further interested in the proto-historic background of global studies, the dawn of its emergence and early phase in its developmental model, owing here to Immanuel Wallerstein⁹ as well as more recent studies on world and global systems¹⁰. My main concerning hinge on the phenomena of internationalization and cosmopolitanism in modern Romania, as they are mirrored in the inter-war novel.

Measuring Globalization

The most conspicuous place of a peripheral country for cosmopolitanism to permeate and thrive is its capital city. This statement, aside from being what we could call a common sense observation, is also sustained by data. Gathering novels from the inter-war period that featured elements of cosmopolitanism (such as the presence of the bourgeoisie, the presence of artistic or intellectual bohemia, cultural exchanges, foreign literature mentions, cinema or theatre representations and so on), it didn't come quite as a surprise that Bucharest was at the undeniable forefront in terms of plot setting. For the following data I used a sample of 150 novels, between 1920s and 1935 – a period I considered crucial for the internationalization of the Romanian novel – a testing period of novelistic patterns, geographies, blueprints. I excluded from my research the rural novel, the novels written for children or young adult audience, the historical novel, and social or experimental novels with alternative settings, namely other than urban. What was left in terms of urban novel is the following distribution:

CITY	%
Bucharest	~40%
Paris	~9%
Iași	~7%
Rome	~4%
Venice	~3%
American Cities	~4%
Other Romanian Cities	~9%
Other European Cities	~18%
Other Foreign Cities (Asia, Africa)	~6%

In light of these statistics, a discussion about the selection of cities made by Romanian authors could also be of great importance and interest, especially for cultural purposes, but I limit my present investigation to the Bucharest scene, in order to show some of the patterns that early globalization movements generated in terms of novelistic formula. In order to open this particular discussion, I shall further present another, quite compelling, set of data:

SPACE	%
Street/Boulevard	~44%
Cinema/Theatre/Museum	~15%
Public Space	~16%
Private Space	~4%

Mapping the novels whose action took place in Bucharest, it can be observed that streets, primarily Calea Victoriei, amid all others settings, raised the highest number of occurrences. Another data set, this time employed on chapters placed in European cities, shows a similar distribution, Calea Victoriei being replaced or mirrored by the Champs-Élysées. The prevalence of the

street in foreign capitals is however easier to explain. The prime goal of traveling to a foreign country in these novels seemed to be to wander on the city's streets, gaze upon its monuments, buildings, people and so on. The presence of the boulevard as most frequent décor in the Romanian modern and urban novel is, on the other hand, rather curious. This phenomenon could state, at least in my interpretation, that the modern novel – a novel of the intellectuals, of the bourgeoisie, a novel that would depict a cosmopolitan society, a sort of sponge-community, able and wishful to absorb foreign, western trends, models, and fashions, as it is predicated by Romanian modernist voices – is the novel that concentrates globalization by means of display. I would evoke, in this matter, Walter Benjamin, according to whom the birth of the middle class, the bourgeoisie, is superimposed to the birth of the shop window, of the boulevard¹¹. To summarize my thesis, the Romanian modern novel turns to global phenomena and translates them by means of display.

As citizens of a peripheral country, individuals that were educated and have written in these settings, novelists have shown how the world has come to our autochthonous culture as an exhibition of trends rather than as social, relational, cultural, or political behaviors. This particular version of metabolizing the foreign says something, I think, about the way of perceiving our own position in the world. Our national scene has been transplanted in our national literature aspiring to synchronization, aspiring to enter in the transnational circuit etc., as a passive agent.

On the functions of the exhibition, numerous conversations have been generated

by the *Great Exhibition*¹², along with the following events of its kind, among which the *Exposition Internationale des Arts et des Techniques appliqués à la vie moderne*, held in Paris, France, from 25 May to 25 November 1937, at the *Palais de Chaillot*. The fervid debates on the functions of this kind of cosmopolitan cultural consumption revolved around the political implications of the events, alongside the effects and consequences that this newfangled setting has in terms of the modernization of city life. In its aforementioned project, *The Arcades*, Walter Benjamin observes that “just as in the seventeenth century it is allegory that becomes the canon of dialectical images, in the nineteenth century it is novelty. Newspapers flourish, along with *magasins de nouveautés*. The press organizes the market in spiritual values, in which at first there is a boom”¹³ and, later in the same book, referring to the world exhibition held in Paris in 1935, “the world exhibitions were training schools in which the masses, barred from consuming, learned empathy with exchange value. «Look at everything, touch nothing»”¹⁴.

There is little novelty now implied in saying that trading and commodity exchange on international markets have represented the dawn of cultural exchange as well and modernization especially in the case of peripheral countries. What Regenia Gagnier has tried to illustrate in her ample study on globalization phenomena as it was related to merchandise circulation in the nineteenth century in Europe has been said a long time ago by literary historian Eugen Lovinescu in his sociological work titled *The History of Modern Romanian Civilization* [Istoria civilizației române moderne]:

The early start of the bourgeois revolution in our country shall be found in the Treaty of Adrianople (1829), through which, by abolishing the Turkish monopole on our cereal production, we gained the freedom of trading. The contact with industrial western countries, while searching for new and bigger markets, marks the beginning of the dissolution of our agrarian regime and the formation of the Romanian bourgeoisie¹⁵.

This phenomenon, brought into discussion by ideologists of the time, was also transferred into the literary material, albeit to a lesser extent in terms of plot (there are very few novels that actually engage in stories related to the commercial scene) and more so in terms of formal devices.

The Global Space and Science Fiction

In order to support this set of data and its brief interpretation, I selected for the following part of this research three science fiction novels that I find quite suited to work as representative case studies. Felix Aderca, Victor Anestin and Henri Stahl are probably the best known and praised science fiction authors in Romania, well received by the international literary circuit¹⁶, albeit this particular novelistic genre has failed to obtain a canonical status in the Romanian culture. Nonetheless, science fiction novels seem to have captured better (and by better, I mean more transparent and vividly) than any other novelistic subgenre, their contemporary *Zeitgeist*. In her aforementioned works on global studies and genre, Wai Chee Dimock states,

more than once, that the primary function of science fiction genre is to present how one nation, or place, or time, understands the world¹⁷. Following these assumptions, I chose to investigate the spatial structures in *Sunken Cities* [Orașele scufundate] by Felix Aderca, *A Romanian on the Moon* [Un român în lună], by Henri Stahl, and *Year 4000 or a Trip to Venus* [În anul 4000 sau o călătorie la Venus], by Victor Anestin.

Felix Aderca is one of the most active commenters amidst modernist voices in the inter-war period. Enthusiastic, highly intuitive, and immensely productive in the journalistic scene of the period, Aderca was quite an underrated novelist in Romania. *Sunken Cities* however is what I call a textbook novel for my aforementioned thesis. The novel follows a cinema operator that imagines a post-apocalyptic world wherein all humanity has left the surface of the Earth and moved to the bottom of the ocean. Sub-aquatic life is organized in glass cities, each with a different function, placed somewhere in Hawaii's area. The catastrophic end is due to the perishing of the sun. The communities from the sunken cities are running out of light and electricity, and struggle to find a way to move closer to the center of the planet. They ultimately fail, and only two survivors leave the planet Earth towards another solar system. It is rather superfluous saying that Aderca's novel is a social satire, because he's quite straightforward in exposing some of his ideological orientations. What interested me even more was this novel's geography. During every episode of the story, some sort of visual means is pointed out. If we were to draw a map of this novel, the most common places would be cinemas, theatres, tunnels, channels, museums, streets, alleys, parks. The sunken cities have their walls

made entirely of crystal. In the core of the prime sunken city, in the capital, there is a large stage, one that gathers the masses by means of a ritualistic, biannual Carnival, one meant to “present the history of the humans”¹⁸. Reading *Sunken Cities*, it is almost impossible for this setting not to stand out.

Drawing once again on Dimock’s research, I note that the Sci-fi novel may be the most cosmopolite of all subgenres, the most in touch with the global, as well as with its historical, ancient, roots, the epic, that used to engage a lot of supernatural characters and plots. Borrowing here some of Hester Blum’s article from *The Planetary Turn* on oceanic studies, I stress out the seemingly postnational setting of Aderca’s novel.

To measure distance at sea, Hester Blum writes, is to measure time on an interstellar scale. The ocean is in permanent opposition to landmarks, inscriptions, and other localizing mechanisms presuming stasis; Planetary and oceanic shifts are invested, in part, in recognizing the artificiality and intellectual limitations of national, political, linguistic, physiological, or temporal boundaries in studying forms of literary and cultural influence and circulation. A fundamental premise of oceanic studies is that such recognized patterns of nation- and capital-based relationality dissolve in the space and time of the sea. This is what literature placed amid water frontiers should embody¹⁹.

In this case however, Aderca not only didn’t erase the national intellectual limitations, as Blum calls them, but reinforced

them. “Only facing the eternal night, the narrator says, the cities can feel genuinely equal”²⁰. This is a quotation from the episode where electricity and light are running out. Otherwise, the cities’ social hierarchy is structured by race and class. The most privileged settings are the theater and the museum and the last one to fall is the main stage. The most terrifying crisis for the last habitants of Earth seem to be the crisis of light, of running out of electricity, and consequently, of means to power the crystal cities, especially the lab, the theatre and the museum. With irony, Aderca exposes the characters’ peripheral status. Dazzlingly, he writes

if man has had the misfortune to arise on Earth, provincial planet of an inferior solar system among others, at least now, when he has the freedom to choose, may him be smart! The farther, the better, so we can lose our track and entirely forget our pedestrian, not at all flattering, origin²¹.

In a similar fashion, about the other planets he shouts “What admirable vacation planets, like American and European cities”. Now, I shall remember that the initial setting was Bucharest of year 5000, but the sunken cities imagined by the cinema operator have been placed somewhere around Hawaii. So, the comparison “like American and European cities” is therefore some sort of slip that somewhat proves my hypotheses, according to which the phenomena of globalization as exposed in the inter-war Romanian novel reveal a peripheral (self) positioning towards the Western society.

Albeit different in terms of non-terrestrial setting chose for the action

development, Henri Stahl's *A Romanian Man on the Moon* has almost the same coordinates in terms of spatial construction as *Sunken Cities* has. A sci-fi novel that has gained the title of the first most notable piece of the genre in Romania, Stahl's novel engages the same *mise en abyme* technique, following the story of a Romanian astronaut who traveled to the moon by a space ship made by himself and another fellow inventor, as told by a journalist who finds the space ship and the astronaut's logbook. Written in a coded language, the journalist finally decipheres the hieroglyphs from the logbook and translates the story in Romanian. The prevalence of the streets (Calea Victoriei garners the higher number of mentions in the novel amid other settings) and the fundamental functions of display means like glass, window or the presence of the hieroglyph as plot advancing devices are a completion of the vast discourse about transcending national and planetary boundaries to be found in Stahl's novel. The periphery complex is at work in this novel too. Entangled with the social critique contained by the novel, fairly discussed in other studies²², the narrator's attitude towards the global, even cosmic, space, revolves around the idea of a long longed-for liberty that comes by detachment:

My wish was to stop being a resident of Earth, tied to it by the mysterious thread of attraction, my wish was to stop depending on it, to stop having its night and its day, having its 24 hours, but I, ordinary mortal, made by my will and my grace, autocrat emperor without a boring parliament, I, all-powerful, to gaze with contempt

the gigantic Earth, humbly rolling at my feet, showing me by turn, as I command, its continents and oceans!²³

This passage addresses the same issue of globalization through the means of exhibition and the relation between the observer and the object of interest, between the spectator and the spectacle, noted above in the discussion about *Sunken Cities*. The man is a passive agent, the witness of a global exhibition – in this case, the literal globe. If Aderca's novel acknowledged the tacit acceptance of the peripheral country facing the global reality rather than its refuse, Stahl seems to get behind the idea that in order to be free, a man or a nation has to shoulder a passive position. Therefore, globalization, once again, comes to the peripheral nation as a complex ceremony or a vivid show, while also having ritualistic valences and being tied to agents like power or religious approach.

In Victor Anestin's case, the dystopian scenario is even more powerful than in the case of its counterparts. *Year 4000 or a Trip to Venus* depicts the story of a society that has banished all emotional agencies and relies solely on science, whether that means to kill the sentimental (i.e. the people considered as weak) in its name and for the sake of its advance and evolution. The cosmic placement of the novel however renders visible the same preoccupation for display means, although the presented society has eliminated art. The first contact with the Venusians is depicted in the same terms of exhibition: "Wherever we looked, we saw millions and millions of phosphorescent lights. Far sight we gazed a nation of lights, and white wings were reflecting that strange light in the space"²⁴. During

the trip, an exchange of cartographic instruments takes place. What stands out for the protagonist is a telescope:

The Venusian put it in my hand and pointed his finger towards Earth. After a preliminary research during which I had the time to admire millions of suns that popped up in front of my eye, by the power of that glass, I found Earth (...) Judging by our telescopes, the one in my hand rendered visible an object two thousand times bigger. While we, in spite of reaching perfection, have failed to dismantle the machinery that supports a telescope, the Venusians watch the cosmos comfortably by means of this tiny glass²⁵.

This is yet another one of the many scenes narrated in the targeted novels that puts the protagonist in the position of the observer. The greater intelligence overwhelms the human nature not by means of sophisticated and advanced technologies, deployed for survival or evolution of the species, but by their achievements in terms of instruments of fine observation and contemplation.

To conclude, all of the three novels analyzed here render visible the same pattern of metabolizing the global input in our national space, employing observation as the main preoccupation of those found in dystopic, post-apocalyptic, post-national scenarios (Aderca and Anestin) or extra-terrestrial (Anestin and Stahl) settings. A national tendency towards understanding and receiving the foreign, the global, was therefore synthesized in this segment of Romanian novel, as I said, by means of display. I consider this a sort of device, one that, for the given timeframe, represented a local or national way to assimilate modernism, to digest globalization, to put order in the chaotic movements of the international influences.

Based on the assumption that every written novel is a product of its own historical internal development, while finding itself in an undeniable relation of dependence with national and foreign models, we can also conclude that novels grow and evolve in a very close relation of influence of its geographical position on the globe. Peripheral literatures have and will always produce specific types of narrative devices, especially while dealing with transnational or cosmopolitan plots.

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NOTES

1. Wai Chee Dimock, *Through Other Continents. American Literature Across Deep Time*, Princeton and Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2006, p. 4.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 83.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 88.
4. See David Damrosch, *What is World Literature?*, Princeton and Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2003 and Idem, *World Literature in a Postcanonical, Hypercanonical Age*, in Haun Saussy (Ed.), *Comparative Literature in the Age of Globalization*, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006, p. 43-53.
5. See Franco Moretti, *Conjectures on World Literature*, in *New Left Review*, 1/2000; Idem, *The Slaughterhouse of Literature*, Duke University Press, *Modern Language Quarterly*, 1(61)/2000; Idem, *Graphs, Maps, Trees. Abstract Models for a Literary History*, New York, London, Verso, 2005.
6. See WReC, *Combined and Uneven Development, Towards a New Theory of World-Literature*, Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 2015.
7. See Amy J. Elias, Christian Moraru (Eds.), *The Planetary Turn. Relationality and Geoesthetics in the Twenty-First Century*, Evanston, Illinois, Northwestern University Press, 2015; Christian Moraru, *Reading for the Planet. Towards a Geomethodology*, University of Michigan Press, 2015.
8. WReC, *op.cit.*, p. 4.
9. See Immanuel Wallerstein, *World-Systems Analysis. An Introduction*, Durham, London, Duke University Press, 2004.
10. See Regenia Gagnier, *Literatures of Liberalization. Global Circulation and the Long Nineteenth Century*, Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.
11. See Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, translated by Howard Eiland, Kevin McLaughlin, Cambridge, London, Harvard University Press, 1999.
12. The Great Exhibition, also known as The Crystal Palace Exhibition, held in Hyde Park, London, England, from 1 May to 15 October 1851, was the first in a series of World's Fair exhibitions of culture and industry.

13. Walter Benjamin, *op.cit.*, p. 11.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 108.
15. E. Lovinescu, *Istoria civilizației române moderne*, Bucharest, Editura Științifică, 1972, p. 80.
16. See Jacques Van Herp, *Panorama de la science-fiction. Les thèmes, les genres, les écoles, les problèmes*, Verviers, Marabout, 1975, or the more recent volume Teresa López-Pellisa (ed.), *The History of Science-Fiction in the Spanish Culture* [Historia de la ciencia ficción en la cultura española], Madrid, La Casa de la Riqueza: Iberoamericana, 2018, a volume that gathers several mentions of these authors as international and valuable figures for the science-fiction genre in Europe.
17. See Wai Chee Dimock, *Through Other Continents. American Literature Across Deep Time*, ed. cit., idem, *Gilgamesh's Planetary Turns*, in Amy J. Elias, Christian Moraru (Eds.), *op. cit.*, idem, *Science fiction as a World Tribunal*, in Michael Freeman, *Law and Popular Culture*, Oxford, New York, Oxford University Press, 2005.
18. Felix Aderca, *Orașele scufundate*, Bucharest, Minerva, 2006, p. 93.
19. Hester Blum, *Terraqueous Planet. The Case for Oceanic Studies*, in Amy J. Elias, Christian Moraru (Eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 25.
20. Felix Aderca, *op.cit.*, p. 114.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 158.
22. See Florin Manolescu, *Literatura S.F.*, București, Editura Univers, 1980 for instance.
23. Henri Stahl, *Un român în lună: roman astronomic*, Bucharest, Institutul de Arte Grafice Tipografia Românească, 1914, p. 82.
24. Victor Anestin, *În anul 4000 sau o călătorie la Venus*, Cluj-Napoca, Dacia, 1986, p. 82.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 85.