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FREEDOM, HUMAN RIGHTS AND CENSORSHIP IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY ROMANIAN LITERATURE

Mainstream contemporary literary studies and also research in the history of political thought¹ consider that at the heart of serious exploration into the field of literary history and literary theory (expressed both in canonical and non-canonical works of all kind) has always been the question: “How shall I read this text?”. The answers have varied greatly over time. When we revisit the works of the past, we read them with an eye towards their immediate application to the present. Throughout historically changing contexts, past literature has shaped its own form of political expression. Within the variety of ways of approaching past texts we must consider the interplay of text and context.

The textual moments in the history of nineteenth-century Romanian literature include political thought, freedom and censorship and the debates about it. Censorship at the time included: controlling the expression, communication and dissemination of ideas. This goes to the heart of issues: authority, obedience, subjection, civility, discrimination of the public and private spheres, control of speech, writing, performance, the state limiting the freedom of expression and thus the good citizen being the one who practices self-censorship, hegemonic pressures of patriarchy, ideology, gender or ethnic superiority, limits to the form of expression (subordinate groups or even majorities), reasons of state security, state secrets, state agencies. The key terms colliding are modern liberal/secular/Western society. What “we may know” vs. what “we should remain in ignorance of” remain disputed issues, thus difficult, complex, and still unresolved. There is much to be learned from literary history: history of censorship is not a straightforward narrative of the triumph of the freedom of speech and expression over repressive tyranny. Reading, thinking and learning about these texts enhance our sensitivity with the past and with the issues brought before us.

¹ G. Kemp and contributors, *Censorship moments. Reading texts in the history of censorship and freedom of expression*, Bloomsbury Academic 2015.

Taking on the suggestions of Romanian historian Constanța Vintilă-Ghițulescu², the changes in the inventory of Romanian's first modernization must be viewed in connection to the problems of the beginnings of the Romanian novel in the context of the modernization of Romanian society produced after 1830. The historical context of our first modernity is linked to the general theory of history and the dual status of this discipline: it cannot be written outside from the narrative and thus the intertext is always present. In the study of the genesis stage of the literary species of the novel we must contextualize and see the Romanian 1848 culture and society as a whole. We are dealing with a defining stage of an entire state founding its modern bases, as well as the crystallization of its own artistic language. All of these represent entirely new forms of expression for us at that time. Her main concern in the previously mentioned study was to answer the following questions: how did the young noblemen, with their new clothes and ideas, manage to transform society and how have these changes (conspicuous in the new state reorganized from the grounds) been reflected into society, morals, the audience of the time, its literary tastes, in book publishing, in the reading preferences? All in all, the question addressed is: how has change occurred in the Principalities? Her book followed the cultural evolution according to the processes that it involved: first of all the simple processes (those involving appearances in the inventory of modernization (body, home, sociability, behavior) which are the easiest to transform and notice. Secondly, the difficult processes, related to the institutionalization of culture through the establishment of teaching, cultural societies, drama, or the press. Foreign travelers in the Romanian countries and their travel notes offer precious snapshots of the whole life from a political, administrative, social and cultural point of view. M. Cochelet, the General Consul of France, wrote in 1835: "I could believe myself to be in a great European capital, if it had not been so shocking contrast between luxury and misery"³. Contrast is seen everywhere: it becomes both the common denominator that resemble both the two capitals (Bucharest and Iași) and the specific difference in relation to the rest of Western European cities that try to emulate. Saint-Marc Girardin, a member of the French Academy, writer and politician, writes in his 1836 travel notes a pragmatic analysis of the Romanian Principalities at that time:

The Principalities are currently in a very special kind of crisis: they live under Turkish oppression, but walk toward prosperity without knowing which will be their political destiny (...); a society that struggles between

² C. Vintilă-Ghițulescu, *Evgheniți, ciocoi, mojiți. Despre obrazele primei modernități românești (1750–1860)*, Humanitas, București 2013.

³ M. Cochelet, *Itinerar în principatele Valahiei și Moldovei* (1835), in S. Vărzaru (ed.), *Prin Țările române. Călători străini din secolul al XIX-lea*, anthology, translation, foreword and notes by Simona Vărzaru, ed. Sport-Turism, București 1984, p. 54.

old Oriental habits and new European ones, which took from the Western civilization rather its aspects and elegant exterior, but not its spirit and specific substance; a general transformation of the houses, the clothes, of the laws and even of the language: this is the image provided nowadays by the two Principalities⁴.

Romanian historian of literature Paul Cornea⁵ thinks that when theorizing change among the cultural elites, we must take into account the public spirit, movement of ideas and literature. According to him, there are three main characteristics: the rapid pace of recovery, the institutionalization of culture and the nationwide expansion of the cultural movement. The energies are unleashed, the rhythm of development accelerates in all the main areas: education, theater, cultural societies, press, printing, literary creation. Now, for the first time the act of culture becomes autonomous and we witness an intellectual union across the temporary borders of the two Romanian Principalities.

In terms of **education** he notices that it promotes the study of the Romanian language, history and geography, playing an important role in developing theoretical thinking and improving the language. Teachers are involved in the cultural movement and to this end there is a real solidarity between the teachers and the authors, based on the same interests and concerns.

The first moral need of the people is that of enlightenment, i.e. to gain radical knowledge. (...) So public teaching has to be regarded as the fundamental basis of civilization in all its extent. (...) So, once again, we have to give public teaching a well-balanced progressive march, neither hurried, nor stationary. (...) These are the principles that must be revealed. As for how to unveil them, we should leave it, as we said, to those who have this task⁶.

After 1830 education comes to the attention of the state and will be systematically organized, on principles contained in the Organic Regulation, but not always found translated into fact. Legal texts stipulated gradation of cycles, expanding instruction into urban areas, promoting the study of the Romanian language, of history and geography of the homeland. We owe the most, in this time of beginnings, to the skill and tenacity of the leaders of school administration. Gheorghe Asachi

⁴ S.-M. Girardin, *Amintiri de călătorie și de studii. București și Iași* (1836), in S. Vărzaru (ed.), op. cit., p. 60.

⁵ P. Cornea, *Originile romantismului românesc. Spiritul public, mișcarea ideilor și literatura între 1780–1840*, București, Cartea Românească 2008.

⁶ George Melidon, *Despre învățătura publică din Moldova, apărut în Foiletonul Zimbrului, 1855*, in P. Cornea, M. Zamfir (ed.), *Gândirea românească în epoca pașoptistă (1830–1860)*, Pentru Literatură, București 1968, pp. 244–250.

(in Moldova) and Petrache Poenaru (Țara Românească–Wallachia) put their energies at the service of establishing schools in the county seats, of establishing schools for the training of teachers, and of a series of specialized schools (agriculture, civil engineering, painting, arts and crafts, boarding schools for girls). Textbooks are being printed to meet the urgent needs of education. Although most were not rising up to the level of mere compilations, yet they played an important role in the development of theoretical thinking and language improvement. Thus the teachers were involved in the cultural movement, which some of them will come to dominate. This gesture of designing school books has united the teachers, with their interests and concerns, with the authors, the actual creators of fiction.

Cultural societies, according to Cornea, aim to be a form of companionship of enlightened noblemen and intellectuals for the main purpose of “raising the country from backwardness and the widest deployment of enlightenment.” The enlightenment goals are often doubled with classified activities, such as conspiracy, freemasonry, aggregating opposition against the regime. For example, *Filarmonica*—“The Philharmonic” cultural society (1833, I. Cîmpineanu, Heliade Rădulescu) had the official purpose: “to promote the culture of the Romanian language and the advancing of literature, the expansion of vocal and instrumental music in the Principality and to that purpose creating a National Theatre.” In secret, it seemed to have developed a political program, which included: liberal views, the idea of the union of Principalities, the need for a hereditary prince, it required equality before the law, supported the emancipation of Gypsies, favoured general contribution, implementation of irremovable magistracy and universal suffrage, asking for the removal of the exclusive protectorate of Russia and an exclusive guarantee of the European powers. Beyond the end of this cultural society, shrouded in mystery, about which Heliade himself gave conflicting versions, we retain its merits of giving an institutional framework to the theatre (by combating dilettantism and improvisation, preparing actors, staging texts, educating the public) and of founding a vast action of translating the universal repertoire (90 plays translated in two years, a truly grandiose number in an era of pioneering such as that one). On the other hand in Moldova there was an unfavorable climate of suspicion and persecution against the activity of cultural societies. Born in an age of community proselytism, based on the idea of “association” as a universal and often utopian means to correct social organization and to elevate the intellectual life to the century they lived in, the founders of such “associations” will politicize them after 1840, when the “young radicals take the place of moderate elders, their objectives become intensely colored with national and democratic elements (...) in all aspects Enlightenment is taken over by Romanticism”⁷.

⁷ Ibid., p. 385.

Theatrical performances in Romanian language were organized even under Ottoman occupation, but after 1821 this activity ceased to exist. It was resumed enthusiastically by Heliade and Asachi, with a deeply rooted belief that theater is a civilizing agent, providing a powerful means of intellectual, moral and aesthetic training, being particularly suitable for a culture in the process of modernization. Although the main difficulties consisted in the existence of censorship, of economic hardships and of competition from foreign theatrical troupes, theatre was still regarded as an instrument of intellectual edification.

As for the Romanian theater, both the administration and the young actors, gripped by the patriotic zeal to form the national scene, will spare no sacrifice or toil, to win public appreciation. Some of the plays that will be presented will be translations of some of the most pleasing foreign authors, while others will be original compositions⁸.

Being aware of the fact that in order to turn the theater into an instrument of intellectual edification its activity should be permanent, they try to make the leap from amateur status to an organization of troupes on a professional basis. But the atmosphere is unfavorable in the beginning, the economic hardships seem insurmountable, and in addition, they have to deal with competition represented by the foreign troupes. The latter, encouraged by the authorities and the moral credit given by the aristocratic public manorial moral credit, seem to be an obstacle difficult to overcome. The work of Paul Cornea, however, stresses that all the efforts do not remain fruitless. Out of this entourage of the beginnings some devoted servants the scene emerge, including C. Caragiale and Matei Millo. Both will contribute to the professionalisation of Romanian theater—the first one in Moldova (setting up theaters in Botoșani and Iași, distinguished by the melodramatic repertory) and the second emerging as an exceptional comic talent and showing early inclinations for authorship. It is with their support that steps towards the professionalizing the theater will be taken, coming out of the experimental phase with no future and turning it into a national institution:

On this road, the year 1840, when should here be the initial of the name? Kogalniceanu, V. Alecsandri and C. Negruzzi rent the theater in Iași, represents an important step—not so much by the quality of immediate achievements, dependent on circumstances—as by the scale of their goals and placing themselves in a perspective of genuine critical exigency⁹.

⁸ *Înștiințare*, Albina românească, 1840, in P. Cornea, op. cit., p. 577.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 387.

The need of a “gazette” was unsuccessfully claimed during the local reigns in the Principalities. A free **press** was mentioned in the program of the *Literary society* (1827). In the beginning this was regarded sympathetically by the Russian administration which needed to popularize the military campaigns in the Balkans and was eager to earn the sympathy of the enlightened Romanian public opinion. The following newspapers appeared: *Curierul românesc*—“The Romanian Courier” (Muntenia), *Novitale de la armie*—“News from the army”, *Albina românească*—“The Romanian Bee” (Muntenia), as well as many others. Cornea notices that the main condition was the compliance with a triple orthodoxy: political, religious and moral. Other difficulties in the evolution of the press included: poor technical conditions (poor quality paper, typography drowning in ink, bad calligraphy), difficult purchasing of materials, low number of readers (e.g. “The Romanian Courier” —after 9 months—280 copies, 225 subscribers, over 2000 lei loss) and the constant harassment by authorities and backward spirits (“Hardly has the first issue of our paper appeared that already there are certain parties who claim that *The courier* is one which rather bites than runs”). Although the press formulates the concept of *national culture*, it faces other limitations in this endeavour: the obligation to publish foreign news and the obligation to publish foreign material, such as reports on the sessions of the Public Assembly, information on the inspection trips of General Kiseleff or notices and addresses of administration.

Typography develops alongside the press, the religious monopoly on printing only lasting until 1830. A close examination of the history of Romanian books¹⁰ (1830–1860) reflects the cultural changes in the Romanian Principalities. As society, morals, fashion, private and public life do, the book also reflects, in turn, transformations of the age and cultural trends, attempting to form and consolidate a national literature. This is a determined start toward the secular books which in a short time outnumber the religious ones. The church control is still strong and many books of the time are full of religious precepts. There is also a tight control of the political power on literary publications, due to their increasing role in the cultural movement. Repression follows all links in the chain of book distribution: published materials are subjected to harsh scrutiny by auditors and printers receive orders not to print any books without due “permits”. Bookstores could only work on the basis of a special authorization granted only to those of good social condition and considered to have good manners. In contrast, where censorship is hindering, a subversive parallel circuit is created. The ardent, revolutionary word is spread in secrecy, underground, printed on flyers (easily transmitted and hidden). When the word of freedom and human rights could not be printed, then the works were spread as manuscripts (as in the case

¹⁰ M. Tomescu, *Istoria cărții românești de la începuturi până la 1918*, Științifică, București 1968.

of the writer Bolliac, whose works have caused the author's banishment to a monastery). Censorship is also mentioned in the first Romanian original novels, depicted as an obstacle:

Because one could speak neither about the rulers, nor religion, nor politics, nor philosophy, nor literature, neither about the people having a job, nor about the ones without a job, neither about the foreign powers, nor about the caste of noblemen, nothing about the merchants, or the peasants, or Gypsies, not a word about the theater, or even about someone who might have a relationship or any knowledge of a person in one of these casts; therefore the gazette had only a limited stretch; and still for the articles which did not reach anyone in particular, one would still have to show his writings to at least two or three censors¹¹.

The printing press progresses hand in hand with the press. Because until 1830 the printing presses were under the monopoly of the church, authors faced the great difficulty of overcoming the slow movement of manuscripts. Those authors who had the means and the necessary relations, published their volumes abroad in Buda or in Sibiu (Alecú Beldiman, Dinicu Golescu or Heliade Radulescu). Therefore, as soon as the favorable socio-cultural climate is established, the main concern of those who assume the role of mentors of the intellectual life would be to acquire printing equipment. Among the most entrepreneurial and operatives are Heliade (1829), C. Leca in Craiova (1830) Asachi (1832) and later, Kogalniceanu¹².

Broadening opportunities for printing gives culture considerable momentum. Books are multiplied and diversified in a few years, production stimulating consumption, whose increase, by ricochet, increases production. To assess the rapid progress of the printing press, Paul Cornea provides a suggestive comparison: “in the decade 1830–1840 there are 1200 printed books, while in the three centuries between 1508–1830, the number of books published is only 2113; in just one year, with the weakest editorial performance, in 1832, there are still 75 works with a circulation ranging between 500 and 2000 copies”¹³.

The development of printing has multiple benefits: on the one hand it coagulates random book production in terms of organized activity, and on the other it covers the needs of education and literature itself, to which it provides an increasingly wider space. The double quality of the pioneers of the period—as cultural mentors and as owners of printing houses—allows them to deliver on

¹¹ Ion Ghica, [Istoria lui Alecu], în Șt. Cazimir (ed.) in *Pionierii romanului românesc* EPL, București 1962, p. 12.

¹² Paul Cornea, op. cit., pp. 392–393.

¹³ Ibid., p. 393.

policy of enlightenment (transforming manuscripts into books), and to satisfy the interest of producing more and profitable, thereby exerting stimulating pressure on the creation and directing it in the form of orders, especially in the field of translation.

Translations, says Cornea, could be explained by a certain vision of the cultural mentors (Heliade, Asachi), by emphasizing the idea of intellectual training, by assimilating foreign experiences as a preliminary stage for the indigenous creations. Their role does not stop there—they are believed to contribute to the integration of Western culture, the purification of morals, the nurturing of taste, cleansing and enriching the language. In addition, beyond the unanimously underlined position of being civilizing and educational, they also carry out another, more prosaic task: that of providing raw material to the newspapers and printing houses, which indigenous writing was not yet able to provide:

So encouraging translations expresses not only a policy of emergencies in culture, but also is trying to solve an eminently practical problem: they constitute an indispensable source of supply with fictional material (equally political, encyclopedic or humorous etc.), with the dual advantage of allowing planning, so working according to orders, and enabling a wide selection, to suit the most diverse tastes¹⁴.

We mentioned earlier that if we examine the history of Romanian books from the period 1830–1860, we see reflected in this field the cultural changes in the society of the Principalities. As do society, manners, fashion, private and public life, the book also reflects, in turn, transformations of the time, cultural trends as attempts to form and consolidate a national literature.

We must stress once again a strong orientation towards the secular books, with the liquidation of religious monopoly on printing. Regarded as an educational tool, but also as an instrument in the social struggle, the secular book will equal and then exceed religious printings. If in the early nineteenth century the secular-religious books ratio was 49.38% to 53.23%, in the third decade of the same century the percentage of printed secular book went up to 74.84% in the Principalities there is a circulation of books which are written and read in a foreign language, in the first phase for the use of high nobility who was multilingual. As education conquers new positions, with the introduction of the Romanian language in schools in Iași and Bucharest, the book begins to be more sought after, as a means of training. But the Church was exerting strong control at this stage, which makes the first educational books to be full of theological precepts. The cultural preoccupations of Romanian society increases, its continuous

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 395.

momentum being supported by an increased printing activity, together with the blossoming of progressive education and of the interest in the fields of culture and science¹⁵.

With the sunset of Greek influence and the orientation towards the culture of France, French books enter into the Principalities book, being read in the original form or as translations. Book demand is great in bookstores of Bucharest and Iași, and they increase significantly in number after 1830. The following bookstores open up: Ion Bogusz, F. Bell, H. Hennig (Iași) or F. Walbaum, C. A. Rossetti and Enric Winterhalder (Bucharest). As an example, in just one shipment from 1835, the bookseller F. Bell from Iași has brought in 95 copies of *Oeuvres complètes* by Voltaire. Among the books imported and sold in Moldova and Țara Românească (Wallachia) literary works prevailed; amid French classic literature (and less English and German ones) one could find philosophical or scientific writings Voltaire, Jean Jacques Rousseau, Paul Henri Holbach, John Locke, Charles Louis de Secondat Montesquieu, George Louis Leclerc Buffon, George Cuvier etc. Ion Bogusz, a bookseller from Iași sold musical notes by Ludwig van Beethoven or Karl Czerny.

Besides the aforementioned bookstores also operated reading offices, which borrowed books for a monthly fee. Their published catalogs provide meaningful information on the literary taste of the readers. The books that were read are varied, belonging both to the canonical authors of literature and to fashionable writers and thinkers, today forgotten : Alexandre Dumas, Honoré de Balzac, Frédéric Soulié, Paul de Koch, George Sand, Eugène Sue, James Fenimore Cooper, Paul Iacob, François René de Chateaubriand, Walter Scott, Victor Hugo, Alphonse de Lamartine, Friedrich Schiller, Jean Racine, George Gordon Byron, Jean François Marmontel, Victor Riqueti de Mirabeau, Alfred de Musset, Jean Jacques Rousseau, Charles Louis de Secondat Montesquieu, Charles Fourier, Saint Simon, Robert Owen and others¹⁶.

The libraries of “superior schools” in Bucharest, Iași and Craiova are reorganized and receive the functions of central public libraries, which facilitates the readers’ access to foreign books, their catalogs indexing the habitual volumes in French, but also in Latin and Greek (especially ancient literature and philosophy) or English, Italian, German, Russian, Polish. Magistracies of the cities organize libraries attached to some of the schools in the counties and various professional groups set up libraries or reading “cazin”. The doctors’ and naturalists’ club from in Iași opens—in 1830—a lecture group, benefiting from subscriptions to 12 journals and which lays the foundation of the first foreign scientific libraries

¹⁵ M. Tomescu, op. cit., p. 110.

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 130–131.

in Romania. The merchants from Bucharest organize, in 1836, their first “cazin” in order to read Romanian and foreign newspapers¹⁷.

After the first moment of the influential literary journal “Dacia literară” (1840) and Kogalniceanu’s exhortations to create an original literature inspired by history and the national customs, in the printing production of the time, the literary book will prevail both in number and in value: “now are published the works of the founding writers of our modern and classical literature, such as Vasile Cârlova, Ion Heliade-Rădulescu, Gh. Asachi, Grigore Alexandrescu, Costache Negruzzi, Vasile Alecsandri, Cezar Bolliac, D. Bolintineanu, Nicolae Filimon and others”¹⁸.

Literary history will retain almost exclusively the pioneering work of only those founders who set the secular foundations of modern printing until the fifth decade of the nineteenth century. For all these publishers (Heliade-Rădulescu, Gh. Asachi, Kogălniceanu) the publication of Romanian books was considered above all a patriotic act of cultural enlightenment. The sole profit taken into account by them was only the spiritual one, for the benefit of the people. It was only Asachi who managed to transform his printing institute into a profitable enterprise.

Since the fourth decade of the nineteenth century the energies are unleashed, the cadence of development accelerates in all areas (education, theater, media, creation). Everything is in the beginning, “roads are grubbed up and foundation stones are set.” The phenomenon of “institutionalization” will have an enormous significance; the cultural act as no longer seen as a mere occupation and gradually various areas begin to delineate and to gain autonomy. The press will enhance mutual knowledge and the tendency of an intellectual union beyond the temporary borders of the two Principalities. We are witnessing an overtaking of the provincial boundaries, expressed by a greater flow of ideas and people, but also by the increasingly more lucid coagulation of a Romanian general interest. By synthesizing Paul Cornea’s research on the processes of institutionalization of this period, it reveals the steps taken towards creating the basic forms of cultural organization: education, societies, theater, press, printing.

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¹⁷ Ibid., p. 132.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 136.

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Summary

Freedom, Human Rights and Censorship in Nineteenth-Century Romanian Literature

This paper, a part of a wider research on the topic of the first Romanian novels, acknowledges their importance in helping us understand the historical and literary context. The identification and description of the genesis stages of this literary genre makes it necessary to appeal to a broad interdisciplinary area (including poetry, literary theory and history, history of mentalities). We must note the tight control exercised by the power on literary publications in the second half of the 19th century, with the increasing role that they play in the cultural movement. The repression follows all links in the chain of book distribution: the published materials are subjected to harsh scrutiny by auditors, printers receive orders not to print any books without due “permits”, bookstores could only work on the basis of a special authorization granted only to those of good social condition and considered to have good manners. Censorship is also mentioned in the first Romanian original novels. But the book’s journey towards its readers can hardly be stopped, it travels more and more, and where censorship is hindering, a subversive parallel circuit is created. The ardent, revolutionary word is spread in secrecy, underground, printed on flyers which are easily transmitted and hidden. And when the word of freedom and human rights could not be printed, then the works were spread as manuscripts (as in the case of the Romanian writer Bolliac, whose works have caused the author’s banishment to a monastery). By forcing us to abandon the convenience, to step outside of our comfort zone, the Romanian literature of the 19th century conveys some of the anxieties of that tumultuous transitional period, and thereby offers us an unmediated contact with a glimpse real literary history.

