

The Romanian Representation of Europe

Europaentwürfe – Positionierungen der rumänischen Literatur nach 1989.

By Miruna Bacali. Bielefeld: transcript, 2021. 264 pp.

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Research in the fields of literary and cultural studies has repeatedly pushed to the foreground questions concerning space and the construction of space that involve examining the appearance of certain regions and regional space formations in literature or other mediums. Questions arising in relation to the theoretical horizon of the spatial turn, postcolonialism and transculturalism have highlighted those aspects of representation of space that have thematised the homogeneity of culture and literatures within the framework of national states and attempted to identify heterogeneity, hybridity, or power mechanisms in fictional spaces. In terms of our own region, there has been an increasing number of questions about the disposition of Central and/or Eastern Europe, its constructed nature, changes, and its defining role in national or cultural identity, which partly overwrite, for example, the function and constructions of space formations.

Miruna Bacali's German language *Europaentwürfe* raises questions about the construction of Europe after 1989 in Romanian literature in the context of these theoretical considerations and seeks to explain what kind of significant representations of Europe have occurred in contemporary Romanian essays and novels in the past thirty years. The subtitle (*Positionierungen der rumänischen Literatur nach 1989*) suggests that the author would like to represent the works that are analysed and Romanian literature through them in terms of their function and place among international representations of Europe.

In the introductory chapter of the book, the author outlines the theoretical framework for the interpretations. The work applies both a literary and cultural studies approach, as the author does not define the period to be examined solely according to categories that are immanent in the literature. However, the corpus that is examined is

not limited to literature, as Miruna Bacali digresses to the areas of interpretative prose, essay, and partly of interview and journalistic texts. This is reinforced by the subtitle of the book, as the term ‘positioning’ might indicate the practice of placing Romanian literature in the context of—recently much discussed and analysed—world literature. All this points to the idea that it is space theories on the one hand and postcolonialism on the other that define the theoretical horizon of Miruna Bacali’s work:

“Die vorliegende Studie ist theoretischen Ansätzen aus dem Bereich der Literatur- und Kulturwissenschaft sowie der Soziologie besonders verpflichtet: zunächst der postkolonialen bzw. dekolonialen Perspektive, dann der Raumtheorie bzw. dem spatial turn, und anschließend der literarischen Europaforschung sowie der Weltliteratur. Die Frage nach einer Zugehörigkeit zu Europa, sei es aus einer kulturellen, geografischen oder institutionellen Perspektive, ist in dem südosteuropäischen bzw. Balkanraum tief mit Fragen nach Legitimität und Selbstbestimmung verbunden. Dies betrifft nicht nur die politisch-institutionellen Interaktionen, sondern auch das kulturelle Selbstverständnis dieser Staaten.” (p 17)

Besides highlighting the aforementioned theoretical framework, the quotation above displays the problematic definition of the origin of the viewpoint even in the book’s introduction, but this seems—and remains—unreflected upon. The issue of belonging to Europe raises the question of how the region and context are to be identified and where the need/issue/rejection of this belonging appears. Here Bacali activates two concepts: “*südosteuropäisch*”, i.e., south-eastern European on the one hand, and the noun “*Balkanraum*” on the other, which—unlike the former term—suggests exclusion instead of inclusion. This displays the very dilemmas of cultural self-definition that are indicated in the last sentence of the quotation. That is why it is not unimportant how the context is defined concerning which representations (outlines) of Europe are examined. While the text—very cleverly—claims in the introduction, citing Ottmar Ette¹ and Peter Hanenberg,² that the representation and concept of Europe can be defined as an always-moving and never concluding process, Bacali is less eager to declare the same in terms of the initial context, especially in the light of recent results and experiences. Looking at even the issues of Europe itself, it might be argued that by focusing on the representations and constructions of Europe in Romanian literature, the possible or assumed spatial division of Europe (Western vs Eastern Europe and Western vs Central Europe) is eliminated by these questions themselves, thus the very question about their being divided cannot be asked.

1 Ette, “*Europa als Bewegung*”.

2 Hanenberg, “*Paul Michael Lützeler*”.

The three big chapters after the introduction (“*Ästhetische und pragmatische Zugänge zu Europa*” by Mircea Cărtărescu and Adrian Marino [Rumänien]; “*Europaentwürfe in der literarischen Fiktion*”, and “*Europäische Erfahrungen der Heimatlosigkeit*” by Norman Manea [USA] and Herta Müller [rumäniendeutsche Perspektive]) examine essays, interviews, and literary works, while the fifth chapter (“*Europakritische Positionen*”) focuses manifestations of Eurocriticism in Romanian literary discourse.

By examining some of the works of the internationally acknowledged writer Mircea Cărtărescu and literary critic Adrian Marino in the first big chapter, Bacali draws attention to the phenomenon that the representation of Europe is one of unity, not division (e.g., Eastern vs. Western). Here, mainly an imagined, desired united Europe takes shape in the analyses; for example, when Bacali points out that the outline of Europe in these texts is naturally not a representation of the European Union—i.e., the political configuration is overwritten by a mental map of Europe that exists in the texts. When comparing national and global, the author arrives at the conclusion that in the texts of both Cărtărescu and Marino, the culture and literature of Romania are not dissolved in those of Europe but can be seen as an organic part of them.

As I see it, the concept and representation of a united Europe outlined in the first chapter are continuously modified by the subsequent chapters inasmuch as the book displays a striking array of ever-changing constructions of identity—a characteristic of the book itself, too. The first part of the second bigger unit is a direct continuation of the second chapter, in which the author examines a novel which does not fit the time frame designated by the subtitle, as it was written before 1989. Ion D. Sîrbu’s (1919–1989) *Adio, Europa* was written in the mid-eighties but published at the beginning of the nineties after the author passed away. The novel, which can be read as an allegory of Romanian communism and Ceaușescu’s dictatorship, received rather little attention; therefore, it was not translated into German or English. It is a significant text in Romanian literature with experimental and postmodern features, yet it has attracted little notice. The plot of the novel takes place in Romania in the eighties in a fictional city/region, Isarlâk. The events depict the power regime of a fictional Ottoman establishment, and a possible Europe is outlined from this perspective. The poetics of the novel, with a number of intertextual references, construct a cultural and literary map of Europe due to the authors and texts that are evoked in opposition to the oppressive practices of the political regime that determines a created, fictional world in the present. Certainly, a possible Europe is outlined in terms of an opposition between West and East, which is identified *as* the West, so—as mentioned before—Europe is not depicted as a unity but rather as a divided space.

The chapter on the sketches of Europe In literature examines the works of two writers who immigrated from Romania to France. Both Dumitru Țepeneas’ and

Matei Vişniec's work is immensely determined by the context of French literature and culture, as a great part of it was written in French after their immigration. Ţepeneag's novel *Hotel Europa* (1996) and Vişniec's collected dramas with the title *Trilogia balcanică* depict a Romania seen from Europe or Paris. Bacali sees Ţepeneag's eclectic, fragmented novel (loaded with a number of autobiographical elements) as a work that can be interpreted in terms of clashing viewpoints that manifest internally as well as externally. These viewpoints question the fragmented, hierarchised representation of Europe as well as the cultural and national space of Romania, which is often pictured in an ironic manner. A similar, fragmented and divided condition is identified when looking at Vişniec's dramas, which deal with the relationship between Romania and Europe, but at the same time place the nationalism of Balkanic peoples and current issues of migration in the foreground. Bacali arrives at the conclusion in his analysis of *Hotel Europa* that the representation of Europe in the book is fundamentally characterised by dynamism and continuous change, and therefore a transitional space is being shaped, whereas in the analysis of Vişniec's dramas, the notion of a transitional space is further reinforced, and the representation of Europe becomes more sophisticated, as due to the cultures of various immigrants, a more heterogeneous space appears. It is to be noted that Bacali could have paid more attention to the fact that Vişniec's dramas were published in French, so the context of the analyses could have been extended to include French media culture and literature.

The fourth chapter of the book features the notion of crossing borders and existence on the border. Two other authors appear in this part of the book, whose positions are different:

“Angesichts ihrer Zugehörigkeit zu nationalen, sprachlichen bzw. Religiösen Minderheitengruppen (Herta Müller deutsche und Norman Manea jüdische Herkunft) sowie ihrer transnationalen Biographien mit Lebensstationen in verschiedenen Ländern, verschiebt sich ihre Position.”
(p. 117)

Norman Manea, who has Jewish ancestry, was born in Bukovina and immigrated to the United States in the second part of the eighties. German-speaking Herta Müller also left Romania for Germany in that period. The two authors are examined in the same chapter, which Miruna Bacal justifies by claiming that they can be identified as minorities in terms of their origin. While Manea's texts were written in Romanian, Müllers wrote in German all along, which makes it hard to justify why she and her prose appear in a book on Romanian literature. Immigration, deportation, the relationship with the past, and its handling as recurring themes certainly make Manea's and Müller's prose relatable; however, the language of their texts makes this comparison problematic. Moreover, Bacali highlights Manea's foreignness (her connection with the Romanian language and culture manifests in the

relationship with Jewish culture and tradition), while in Müller’s case, the Romanian language and culture can be seen in the effect they had on her own German language and in her reflections on them. All this has an effect primarily on the representation of Romanian language and culture, and the representation of Europe is less in the limelight. At this point, it might be argued that this chapter is problematic, as it displays representations of Europe to a lesser extent, despite this being the primary aim of the book. As I see it, it might have been worthwhile including Cătălin Dorian Florescu’s work in the scope of analysis, who—being an author living in Switzerland and having changed languages—is more intricately connected to Romanian literature. If we discard language as a primary, definitive element in terms of the identity of a certain literature, there are a number of Hungarian writers who have also thematized not only Romania but Romania’s relationship with Europe, the most recent example of which is Andrea Tompa in her novel *Haza*.

After the examination of literary works that have thematized Europe and emphasized the idea of belonging to Europe and therefore employed a clearly defined speaker’s perspective, almost as a counterpoint, Bacali looks at Horia-Roman Patapievič’s essays and Nicolateta Esinescu’s journalistic writings. This is not without precedent, as in the second chapter, the author interpreted Mircea Cărtărescu’s and Adrian Marino’s non-literary texts, which also underlines the intention of the book to extend the scope of investigation beyond the realm of literature. This intention is questioned, as the representations of Europe in literature are in fact contrasted with the ones in journalism, the latter being significantly more defined by events of politics and socio-political happenings than the literature. Therefore, the representations of Europe in the book become more sophisticated, and the background for Eurosceptic standpoints can be understood in terms of the oppositions of religious vs non-religious, Christian vs non-Christian, and national vs global. This notion of binary oppositions includes modern vs postmodern, too, when Bacali quotes one of Patapievič’s essays: “*A fi modern este o mare ocazie. A deveni post-modern este o fundătură*” (p. 183). [Being modern is a great milestone. Becoming postmodern is a dead-end.] That all seems problematic because we leave the realm of literary interpretations behind, and Bacali’s book includes texts in the scope of analysis that extend far beyond the representation of Europe in Romanian literature or literary discourse.

The ending part of *Europaentwürfe* points to the final conclusion that Romanian literature (and its discourse in the broadest sense) includes a number of representations of Europe that are constantly changing by nature. What seems to be shaping into a homogeneous tendency is that the representation of Romania in these texts is constructed in relation to the currently imagined and outlined representation of Europe, which—as with all constructions of identity—is constantly changing. Basically, a mostly Eurocentric Romanian literary realm is outlined here, even when

considering the conclusions of Eurosceptic texts, as these, too, find their standpoint in relation to Europe as an imagined idea. Within this relationship with Europe (the book itself serving as a good example), the German and French literary contexts have a distinguished role. The former is a potential target language of translations and an arena for the representation of Romanian literature (this could be a reason for the inclusion of Müller's oeuvre in the examination), and the latter is a linguistic context for Romanian literature, which is newer, but not without precedent. At this point, it is interesting to note that most of the texts that are examined are by authors with an immigrant background, and some of their work is not written in Romanian. This seems to suggest that Romanian literature born in Romania thematizes Europe to a lesser extent and depicts a picture of Romanian literature in which Romanian language is not a decisive element. These findings may inspire interesting further questions, but the book fails to thematize these. In terms of the literary historical works analysed at the end, it is interesting to mention *Romanian Literature as World Literature*,³ published in 2019, which Bacali looks at in his analysis, and which indicates well that positioning Romanian literature in an academic context which is primarily English is a priority. In this sense, besides the dynamically changing representations of Europe, a representation of marginalised Romanian literature striving towards the centre can also be sensed. This position is not alien to any literatures in Central Europe, nor is it to Hungarian literature, and the book itself seems to partly reinforce this position.

Literature

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3 Martin, Moraru, and Terian, eds, *Romanian Literature*.

