



NEW SCALES FOR REGIONAL STUDIES IN CREOLIZING THE MODERN: TRANSYLVANIA ACROSS EMPIRES

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Abstract: This review article tries to formulate some general remarks about the most innovative elements of *Creolizing the Modern: Transylvania across Empires*, published by Anca Parvulescu and Manuela Boatcă in 2022 at Cornell University Press, findings that most probably will open up for future research new directions in conceptualizing Transylvanian identities. It also tries to identify some of the problematic aspects of the overview offered by the volume. ‘Worlding’ Transylvania is a double-edged strategy that may edit out nuances that could be important for local communities.

Keywords: inter-imperiality, Transylvania, Romanian literature, Hungarian literature, modernism.

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In the context of the planetary turn of literary studies, it is necessary to reevaluate our knowledge about our most familiar concepts, methods, and even some of our everyday realities. The coauthors of *Creolizing the Modern: Transylvania across Empires* propose a creative rereading of Transylvania as a cultural construct, through a single major novel of Romanian literature: *Ion* by Liviu Rebreanu. Seen through the silenced voices of the novel, the unwritten stories of secondary characters and plotlines, and recontextualizing the best-known elements of the narrative, this innovative approach to *Ion* highlights many unexpected aspects that can be connected to the novel. By claiming equal relevance to absence and presence in the narrative, the authors succeed in telling a story of Transylvania that may be accessible to international scholars. Interestingly enough, while the methodology of the book is based on very close interpretations of some passages from *Ion*, the result is nevertheless an adaptation of Transylvania for a distant reading - that is, translating previous discussions about Transylvania for a planetary audience.

As a scholar with expertise in 20th-century and contemporary Transylvanian Hungarian literature, and in some of the transcultural aspects and imagology

of Transylvanian (Romanian, German, Hungarian) literatures, I will formulate in the following paragraphs some general remarks about the most innovative elements of the volume, findings that most probably will open up for future research new directions in conceptualizing Transylvanian identities. Next, I will try to also identify some of the problematic aspects of the overview offered by the volume, generalizations, and homogenizing strategies that I connect precisely to the ‘distant reading’ paradigm that Transylvania is translated for in the book. ‘Worlding’ Transylvania is a double-edged strategy that may edit out nuances that could be important for local communities.

To begin with the positive sides of the volume, we should welcome the collaborative effort that lays behind it. As the authors point out in their introduction, the divide between hard and soft sciences somewhat overshadows another divide within soft sciences themselves □ between the humanities and the social sciences. While recent conceptualizations of world culture as a flow of information and cultural products on one hand, and those that amplify the oneness of the world-system on another, seem to exemplify opposite directions of study, there are also many shared opinions that facilitate

cooperation between the fields. Sociological and literary analyses reformulate, from an interdisciplinary perspective, the connections and contexts that *Ion* may dynamize during a creative reading process.

While the issues raised in *Ion* may seemingly form only a microsystem of a fictional story, the chapters of the volume convincingly show how entanglements and connections at a much larger scale emerge from phrases and silenced voices of the novel. More generally, the interdisciplinary framework offers an impressive number of arguments in favor of a contextual approach of literary texts, reaffirming the necessity of carefully analyzing socio-historical references of the novel. *Creolizing the Modern* constitutes in this sense a possible model of discussing literature's social history.

As a consequence of the interdisciplinary approach, the authors convincingly highlight the networked structures behind social practices previously seen as traditional - offering a new scale for interpreting the local, not only in the circulation of goods like blue print (149) -, but also when discussing the possible role of the Ottoman Empire in protecting religious diversity in Transylvania. (159) Another objective of the book, positioning the East Central European region, and within it, Transylvania in particular, as a space where inter-imperial dynamics can be observed as clearly as in a laboratory, is achieved through discussing various topics, among them, religious diversity. In this sense, Transylvania becomes a condensed model for diversity, although this variety is still a limited one, due to the historical power structures that marginalize some of the religions of Transylvanian communities. Transylvania does not offer a wide range of racial differences that would equal the ones described in postcolonial societies, but through religious and national differences, and also racial marginalization of Jews and Romani people, it constitutes a space of diversity in the *longue durée* of history. Although Rebreanu's focus in *Ion* is centered around national differences and marginalizations, racial and gendered peripheries are also visibly present in the narrative. Through these, Parvulescu and Boatcă realize a quite generous overview of Transylvanian society during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

A careful and fair representation of geographical and settlement names in three languages (Romanian, Hungarian, German) is methodologically relevant for the book. While 'worlding' Transylvania, the authors are consequent in going beyond methodological nationalism by offering a diverse image of Transylvania, including the speech act of referencing place names. Deconstructing the power structures of the Austro-Hungarian empire means for the authors also to deconstruct any other essentializing efforts of the official culture. Peripheries, minor elements like women's rights in a patriarchal, rural society, can become agents of an inter-imperial negotiation precisely through such conceptualizations, opened up for real diversity.

Another aspect to be acknowledged refers to a

critical approach towards previous, seemingly narrow conceptualizations of modernism. This criticism means for the authors reconsidering the role of religion in the age of modernity and questioning the universal notion of secularization. The authors argue that many instances of the so-called modernization, in the colonies and elsewhere, implied a religious, Christian background, so identifying modernization with a clearly and exclusively secular worldview may offer a false picture. Modernity as a prototype of secularism may be a Eurocentric construct but seen from a planetary perspective it is quite relevant to consider it in its antagonism with religion and with rural values. Although such an approach may lead to an excessive broadening of the concept of modernity, it is nevertheless quite necessary to question the exclusively Eurocentric views on modernization in a global discussion of the topic. Through highlighting female marginalization, lack of Romani and Jew rights in the European context, the authors convincingly show that even in the Eurocentric world, there were many problematic aspects and blind spots that unmasked any attempts of universalization as claims for a false and only partial universalism.

Now I will turn to formulate also some critical remarks about the volume written by Parvulescu and Boatcă, a volume that, as I have shown above, opens up new perspectives for literary studies in many respects. Among the negative aspects we may identify the strategy of taking for granted the categorization of *Ion* as a 'modern' novel - explanations of this aspect are absent or are mixed with elements that render the novel as 'traditional' in many ways in its content. Previous interpretations insisted on stylistic aspects when describing *Ion* as a modern novel, an aspect that resonates in the current interpretation with identifying the naturalist and somewhat ironical aspects of the narration. However, in the authors' approach, style is rather secondary. *Pădurea spânzuraților* [The Forest of the Hanged] may have been much more 'modern' than *Ion* in this sense, with the constant reformulations of the desires and views of the protagonist. Another frequent categorization of *Ion* refers to 'objective realism', which is something quite different from modernism in a narrative sense. Although the authors attempt to deconstruct this paradox by referring to creolizations of modernism with realist techniques on the planetary scale, my opinion is that the claims that *Ion* is a modern novel in the current sense (and not only according to Romanian literary critic Eugen Lovinescu's view) would have needed a much clearer argumentation.

As a critic who formulates his observations inclusively through the perspective of the current Hungarian minority from Romania, I must refer also to some elements of discussing the Hungarian connections and contextualizations of *Ion*. In this sense, the most important remark would be that the volume seems to overgeneralize the post-1867 imperial situation in Transylvania, which is quite relevant for the novel *Ion* itself, but constitutes only a particular part of



Transylvanian history. Historically, in a *longue durée* perspective, the 1867–1918 period is just another episode that is preceded by other types of power structure and state authority in Transylvania. This is one of the aspects of the book that I referred to in the introductory remarks of my review, that is, as a homogenizing strategy of the volume to make Transylvania more intelligible for a ‘distant reading’ perspective. In this sense, the analysis of Parvulescu and Boatcă tends to homogenize the Transylvanian ethnic groups in their power relations. The example of landownership, central to the plot of *Ion* cannot be seen exclusively in its ethnical dimensions – Szeklers themselves, as regional segments of the Hungarian population, being in many respects marginalized by the new, post-1867 landownership regulations. This does not question, of course, the multi-layered marginalization of Romanians, women, Jews and Romani people, described by the authors of the book, just offers an argument that the inter-imperial power structures discussed by the authors were not homogeneous throughout the centuries of Transylvanian history. All these relations meant a constant need to negotiate and renegotiate identities within this territory.

Another debatable argument of the book refers to the case of ACLU – the first review of comparative literature, edited in Cluj/Kolozsvár/Klausenburg by Hugó Meltzl and Sámuel Brassai. Parvulescu and Boatcă tend to present their efforts towards a linguistic diversity as a selective and exclusivist strategy.² In current, postcolonial terms this remark is perfectly valid, of course. The question is whether during the Hungarian nation-building process of the 19th century, Meltzl’s and Brassai’s attempt to create a new discipline and a plural cultural network system could be considered an early alternative to methodological and not only methodological nationalism. As Levente T. Szabó’s articles about ACLU convincingly pointed out, the deconstruction of the framework of national literatures in Meltzl’s and Brassai’s review can be argued through their consequent thematization of regionalisms, of vernacular languages, of folklore texts. ACLU constantly highlights literary productions below the ‘national’ level, and pays special attention to minority or contested

cultures like Occitania, Ireland, or the Romani culture of the region. In this respect, a deeper reflection could be made on the fact that the linguistic politics of the journal and of comparative literature itself go very much against the nationalistic views of the Hungarian politics of the time. In this sense, ACLU is not typical for the Hungarian cultural field, but a rather interesting and innovative exception. This representation of ACLU is most probably the effect of speaking to a presumably global audience: in this sense, the failure of the journal to represent the global cultural diversity is relevant, and can be described as a Eurocentric approach with local consequences. However, it is perhaps important to notice the innovative efforts of the editors, that attempted precisely to subvert the exclusivist perspectives of national culture and high culture, characteristic for the period. In this sense, ACLU is much more interesting and subversive than the imperial logic itself that was very much on display at the time in Transylvania.

Another minor observation concerning the volume’s strategy targeting cultural translation would refer to the fact that sometimes the explanations offered in the volume seem superfluous, discussing some obvious everyday realities. One example could be the supervision by the Romanian priest of the fieldwork, which seems quite logical from a local, but also from a global capitalist perspective. The authors present this aspect as something extraordinary, something that must be explained for a global audience. I personally doubt that such practices need a very careful explanation, precisely because of the globalized logic of such community relations. In this particular case therefore the close reading strategy seems to go too close to the text.

To conclude, we should emphasize once again the innovative character of the collaborative effort. Even if some nuances of the Transylvanian experiences had to be omitted from the overview, Anca Parvulescu and Manuela Boatcă offered a generous and contemporary model to discuss aspects of Transylvanian culture. Creolization and inter-imperiality as globally recognizable analogies for the historical interconnectedness of Transylvanian cultures become in the volume functional theoretical suggestions to further discuss relevant aspects of Transylvanian literatures.

Notes:

1. Anca Parvulescu and Manuela Boatcă. *Creolizing the Modern: Transylvania across Empires* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2022).
2. See on this topic Levente T. Szabó, “International Exhibitions, Literary Capitalism, and the Emergence of Comparative Literature,” *Journal of World Literature* 7, no. 3 (2022): 332–347. Levente T. Szabó, “Negotiating the Borders of Hungarian National Literature the Beginnings of the Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum and the Rise of Hungarian Studies (Hungarologie),” *Transylvanian Review* 22 (2013): 47–61.

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