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## Intertextuality as a World-Literature Mechanism: German and French Sources in Mircea Ivănescu's Poetry

**Abstract:** While the Anglo-Saxon intertext is the most clear one in Mircea Ivănescu's poetry, the French and German intertexts are at least as present and fertile. Proust and Camus, on the one hand, and Rilke and Goethe, on the other, represent the *stellae fixae* in the complicated constellations of his allusions and paraphrases; besides them, innumerable other quotations or references to the French and German cultural sphere build the consistency of his poetic universe. The significance of this rich German and French intertextuality is twofold: on the one hand, it shows that Romanian literary criticism hurriedly relegated Ivănescu's poetry in the wake of Anglo-Saxon postmodernism exclusively – and, given the fact that his four fixed stars are three high modernist poets and a pre-modern one, it is disputable if one can label Ivănescu as a postmodern at all; even though the respective pre-modern poet, namely Goethe, is considered by Jeremy Adler, in his recent monumental monograph, “the inventor of modernity,” one can still argue that none of Ivănescu's most frequent intertexts is excerpted from a postmodern writer, which could be taken to indicate something meaningful regarding his postmodern affinities. On the other hand, it shows how intertextuality can function as a world-literature mechanism in accordance with Damrosch's description: it is “a form of detached engagement” which takes the writer out of the frame of reference of his national culture and operates in his literature the “elliptical refraction” Damrosch sees as the first trait of world literature.

**Keywords:** modern and contemporary Romanian literature, Romanian poetry as world poetry, translation and intertextuality, Mircea Ivănescu

As David Damrosch defines it, world literature cumulatively displays three sets of qualities: *primo*, it exceeds and expands national literatures; *secundo*, it accumulates while circulating in translation; *tertio*, it engages one writer or one literature with worlds beyond their own place and time. In Damrosch's own words, “1. *World literature is an elliptical refraction of national literatures.*/2. *World literature is writing that gains in translation.*/3. *World literature is not a set canon of texts but a mode of reading: a form of detached engagements with worlds beyond our own place and time*”<sup>1</sup> (italics in the original). It is immediately noticeable

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1 David Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press,

that Damrosch's definition of world literature involves translation as its natural medium, as well as the natural changes undergone by a text through translation. Damrosch admits that while "traveling abroad, though, a text does indeed change, both in its frame of reference and usually in language as well"<sup>2</sup>; the novelty he brings is that these changes are not negatively connotated, as it usually happens. For Damrosch, these changes represent a *gain*, as he underlines by italicization. Translation brings the source text into a new referential world – which may function as a new enriching frame of reference.

Even though Damrosch has given it comparatively less attention than translation, intertextuality does exactly the same thing: by excerpting some textual tissue from one linguistic organism and reinserting it into another, it changes the respective fragment – "both in its frame of reference and usually in language as well," in the words of the Harvard professor. Intertextuality is another major form of text circulation; just like translation, it operates "a form of detached engagement" with worlds exterior to the place and time of the writer who operates the intertextual procedure. Just like translation, it also adds some extra layers of meaning to the original text: the cut-out passage is usually reintegrated into a context which alters the original meaning, sometimes ironically, other times approvingly, but always acquiring (at least theoretically) some new contextual meaning. Thus, one can supplement Damrosch's definition and conclude that *world literature is writing that gains in translation – as well as in intertextuality*.

While focused mainly on translation as the main medium of world literature, Damrosch himself has more than once also paid attention to intertextuality as a "mode of reading" which can constitute world literature. In his most recent book, *Around the World in 80 Books*,<sup>3</sup> Damrosch shows, for instance, how the different versions of Jesus's last words on the cross, as they are reproduced in the gospels from Saint Mark to Saint Luke, represent quotations or paraphrases of some psalms which were quite familiar to the Jewish readers of the gospels. In the last minutes of his life on the cross, Jesus practiced intertextuality. From Saint Mark to Saint Luke, the evangelists have made use of references to different psalms in order to convey the reader either an apocalyptic or a victorious feeling, in accordance with the tone and undertone of the referenced psalm. As Damrosch convincingly shows, taken in chronological order, Jesus's intertextual last words were successively modified such as to appeal to a more non-Jewish

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2003), 281.

2 Ibid., 292.

3 David Damrosch, *Around the World in 80 Books* (London: Pelican, 2022).

community, to expand and to extend beyond the national religious literature available to the Jewish community. Jesus's last words on the cross have been successively modified in order to "tell a local story for a global audience," and Saint Luke's version was therefore religious literature consciously conceived as world literature.<sup>4</sup> Even though he does not phrase it exactly in this manner, what Damrosch compellingly shows here is that intertextuality can build world literature just as effectively as translation can. And it is absolutely normal it should; if we carefully read some other major passages where Damrosch defines world literature, we can clearly see that what he writes about translation as a germinative medium for world literature is also completely applicable to intertextuality. All the characteristics of world literature built *via* translation are also recognizable in world literature built *via* intertextuality. Let us take, for example, the following passage: everything it says about "double refraction" is just as applicable to translation as it is to intertextuality:

"Even a single work of world literature is the locus of a negotiation between two different cultures. The receiving culture can use the foreign material in all sorts of ways: as a positive model for the future development of its own tradition; as a negative case of a primitive, or decadent, strand that must be avoided or rooted out at home; or, more neutrally, as an image of radical otherness against which the home tradition can be defined more clearly. World literature is thus always as much about the host culture's values and needs as it is about a work's source culture; hence it is a double refraction, one that can be described through the figure of the ellipse, with the source and host cultures providing the two foci that generate the elliptical space within which a work lives as world literature, connected to both cultures, circumscribed by neither alone."<sup>5</sup>

On the other hand, intertextuality *is* translation whenever the authors use linguistic materials taken from other languages and rephrased in their own; in our post-national world, contemporary writers work across and among languages, and the circulation of linguistic materials is more intense and massive than ever, which makes the case for national literatures almost untenable. As Damrosch observes,

"The one-to-one identification of nation and language was almost always a fiction, and it is becoming more and more tenuous today, even in the case of many small countries with a national language rarely spoken beyond their borders. A full view of contemporary Israeli literature should include writing in Arabic, Russian, and Yiddish as well as Hebrew, and Romanian literature includes the work of the Nobel Prize winners Eugène

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4 Ibid., 2017.

5 Damrosch, *What Is World Literature*, 283.



Ionesco in French and Herta Müller in German as well as Andrei Codrescu and Norman Manea in America, writing in English and Romanian, respectively.”<sup>6</sup>

In what follows, we will focus on the case of Mircea Ivănescu, a Romanian writer who, both *via* translations and *via* intertextuality, has conceived his work as world poetry – i.e., in Damrosch’s terms, as an “elliptical refraction” of his own national literature, as “writing that gains in translation,” and as a “mode of reading” which involves “a form of detached engagement.” Our interest is twofold: *primo*, we aim at seeing how intertextuality becomes world literature; *secundo*, we want to show that German sources in Ivănescu’s poetry are at least as numerous and meaningful as Anglo-Saxon ones – thus bringing a necessary nuance to the generally accepted assumption regarding his poetry’s Anglo-Saxon, postmodernist inspiration.

Considered a major poet by most critics (Mircea Cărtărescu calls him “the most theoretically advanced and influential Romanian poet after World War 2”<sup>7</sup>), Ivănescu was also a major translator – mainly of Anglo-Saxon modern writers, but also of German ones. As it often happens, the Anglo-Saxon writers he translated (Joyce, Faulkner, Pound, Eliot, etc.) made their way as intertextual references in his poetry; this fact has made literary critics consider Ivănescu’s poetry the inflection point where Romanian poetry makes a deliberate turn from the French and German sources of poetic influence (which were chiefly dominant before World War 2) and towards the Anglo-Saxon ones – thus ushering postmodernism into Romanian literature. His poems have quite often been deemed postmodern simply because of the evidence of their Anglo-Saxon intertextuality. Now, it is perfectly true that Ivănescu is the first major Romanian poet who has made Anglo-Saxon literature(s) a source of his “anxiety of influence,”<sup>8</sup> yet several amendments to this generally accepted assumption are necessary. The first one is strictly theoretical: the area of influence, as well as the source of influence, considered as virtual catalysts for the genesis of the poem, are nevertheless external to the poem as such, and cannot be analytical or descriptive tools in devising the work of art, be it a poem or any other art form. The relationship between the source or the area of influence and the work itself is illustratively expressed in Magritte’s famous 1936 painting *La Clairvoyance*, in which the painter seated in

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6 David Damrosch, *Comparing the Literatures: Literary Studies in a Global Age* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2020), 175–176.

7 Mircea Cărtărescu, *Postmodernismul românesc* (București: Humanitas, 2010), 347.

8 Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).

front of the easel has an ordinary egg as his model, while the canvas shows a vivid bird. The area of influence, external to the work, is worth nothing in itself, nor does it explain anything. Invoking the change in the area of influence in order to determine the essence of poetry is not a fully convincing argument.

Moreover, it is not entirely true that Mircea Ivănescu deliberately turns from the French and German cultural areas to the Anglo-Saxon one. A graduate of the French Department of the Bucharest University, he made his debut as a translator with the Romanian rendition of Henri Perruchot's *Life of Gauguin*<sup>9</sup> (1968). The preoccupation with the French cultural space was consistent throughout his entire literary activity, as he translated from French and even wrote poems in French – no less than a hundred such poems, a good part of which are still in manuscript form in the Mircea Ivănescu literary fund at the ASTRA County Library in Sibiu. French literature and especially French poetry provide constant references for innumerable cultural allusions in his poems. Arguably, the most frequent intertext in Ivănescu's poetry is of French origin – namely Albert Camus's famous definition of truth from *Noces*, which has definitively marked Mircea Ivănescu's *Weltanschauung* and hauntingly reappears throughout his literature: “Je nomme vérité ce qui continue” (“I call truth what continues”). This is a definition of truth often alluded to starting with Ivănescu's very first poetry collection, *Lines*, from 1968 (see poems such as “game of chess,” “about death as farewell” – especially the second part –, “short story,” “pale stars,” “a visit, in the evening” – especially this one, which talks about the necessity of continuity, of “following” as the only voucher of truth; Ivănescu never uses capital letters in his poems, nor in their titles; we will render the quotes accordingly, only using capital letters for volume titles), and it remains a constant reference for Ivănescu's poetry until his last volumes. (Additionally, his two book-length interviews, conducted by Gabriel Liiceanu and Vasile Avram,<sup>10</sup> respectively, contain numerous allusions and paraphrases of Camus's statement.) One of the best examples is the poem called “not so much a scholia as an attempt to ask for forgiveness or explaining why some are bored on sundays,” from *Commentarius perpetuus*<sup>11</sup> (initially published in 1986), the poetry volume written in collaboration with

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9 Henri Perruchot, *Viața lui Gauguin* (București: Meridiane, 1968).

10 See Mircea Ivănescu and Gabriel Liiceanu, *Măștile lui M.I.* (București: Humanitas, 2012); Mircea Ivănescu and Vasile Avram, *Interviu transfinit. Mircea Ivănescu răspunde la 286 de întrebări ale lui Vasile Avram* (Bistrița: Casa de editură Max Blecher, 2012).

11 Mircea Ivănescu and Rodica Braga, *Commentarius perpetuus* (București: Tracus Arte, 2023). Edited by Corin Braga, with an introduction by Mircea Braga.

Rodica Braga. Then, returning to Ivănescu's adherence to French literature, we will notice that a poem in the first volume is called "a scene from a french novel." Another poem, called "to his left," opens with the following lines: "in the novel I still want to write,/it's supposed to be a french scene". Another poem is titled "malebranche is right," and so on. Ultimately, perhaps the most important argument that could be brought to this universally accepted hypothesis of Ivănescu's exclusive Anglo-Saxon sources is that regarding his often-remarked Proustianism. From Nicolae Manolescu's first review of Ivănescu's poetry onwards, almost all his significant commentators considered Proust's literature a source as equally important to Ivănescu's poetics as the Anglo-Saxon references. This almost self-evident fact should completely annihilate the idea of a definitive revolution (in the etymological sense) of Ivănescu's poetry from the continental European culture towards the insular and trans-oceanic Anglo-Saxon one.

Besides the French sources, German poetry and culture also decisively infuse the substance of Ivănescu's poetry. In the well-known interview conducted by Dinu Flămând and published in 1978 in *Amfiteatru*, Mircea Ivănescu testified: "From all my readings, however, the meeting with Rilke was of greatest importance for me. From him I learned that verse can be stopped anywhere and continued from anywhere; when I understood this, I was also able to write."<sup>12</sup> As this testimony makes clear, the importance of German literature in the development of Ivănescu's poetry is supremely significant, as the reading of one of the major German poets becomes, with Alexandru Cistelean's exact and memorable words, equivalent to a "tongue disentanglement."<sup>13</sup> One sees confirmed here, in a brilliant way and applied on an equally brilliant example, Lucian Blaga's hypothesis according to which the influence of German culture is of a catalytic type, revealing and nourishing the dormant nature of one's personality (either at the individual level or regarding culture as a whole). The guiding principle of this catalytic action would be, according to Blaga, an example that can be summed up in the imperative: "Be yourself!" As one can see from the confession quoted above, Mircea Ivănescu became the poet he was supposed to be only after the catalytic meeting with Rilke, from whom he "learned" and "understood" everything he needed in order to be able to write. At its point of origin, Ivănescu's poetry was catalyzed by one of the most important poets of German literature – another

12 Mircea Ivănescu, "Interviu," *Amfiteatru*, no. 4 (1978): 12.

13 Alexandru Cistelean, *Mircea Ivănescu. Monografie, antologie comentată, receptare critică* (Braşov: Aula, 2003), 36.



significant fact which should suffice in determining critics to abandon the thesis of its exclusive Anglo-Saxon origins.

Rilke's influence, however, is perceivable only at this strictly formal level of a verse that "can be stopped anywhere and continued from anywhere" (let us remark, *en passant*, on how much self-irony is contained in the deliberately banal way of summarizing an essential lesson); from the author of the *Duino Elegies*, Mircea Ivănescu has also learned another fundamental lesson, namely that of never making the definitive separation between art and life. In a certain moment, Rilke wrote to his friend Lou Andreas-Salomé: "I don't want to separate life from art." It is more than likely that Mircea Ivănescu had also read these words, as he certainly re-read their correspondence and made relatively frequent allusions in his poems to this flamboyant and charismatic Russian woman who played a significant – even capital – role in the lives of some major figures of German and Austrian culture, such as Nietzsche, Wagner, Freud, or Rilke. Nicolae Balotă's insightful comment on Rilke's previously quoted phrase helps us better understand the way in which Mircea Ivănescu adapted this permanent contiguity of life and poetry for his own use:

"Far from brutally separating the work from the life of this poet [...], also far from making them strictly correspond to each other, we can consider his life as a poetically stylized existence, as one lived under the sign of this continuous, essential Beginning of Poetry."<sup>14</sup>

"Poetically stylized existence:" Balotă's expression seems to have been excerpted from a review to one or another of Mircea Ivănescu's poetry collections. We are not overlooking the fact that its reference was Rilke's existence, not Ivănescu's; the two poets had completely different understandings as of how poetry and life should be made convergent. Whereas Rilke tried to elevate any moment of life to the oracular demands of transcendental poetry, Mircea Ivănescu, on the contrary, wanted poetry to endure and persist in every corner, no matter how banal, of the immanent. Nevertheless, for both poets, lyricism and existence must be coextensive; the main difference lies only in the orientation of their respective vectors: while for Rilke, poetry is oriented towards the essence, for Mircea Ivănescu it should incessantly point towards existence.

Besides Rilke, Goethe is the other major influence of German literature on Mircea Ivănescu's poetry; the poet self-disparagingly acknowledges the fact in

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14 Nicolae Balotă, *Literatura germană de la Sturm-und-Drang la zilele noastre* (Cluj: Dacia, 2002), 183.

another interview, conducted by Titu Popescu and published in *Vatra's* last issue from 1983: "To justify my state of mind in an elegy and, in order to be able to continue to write it, to take a quote or rather an allusion to another elegy by Goethe, for example – this is not really a proof of original talent or poetic force."<sup>15</sup> His poems, moreover, abound in references not only to Goethe, but to many other writers in German literature; a poem from the first volume, "poetry is something else?," has Rilke's *Letters to a young Poet* as a reference. In the "mopeteiana" cycle, alongside the references to Lichtenberg or Fechner, for example, we identify a poem called "mopete has read thomas mann." Without further insisting, we limit ourselves to saying that cultural references oriented towards German literature are identifiable in all the lyrical work of Mircea Ivănescu, from the first volume, as we have previously seen, to the last ones. The yet unpublished manuscripts in the ASTRA County Library also display numerous references and allusions to the German cultural area. Besides these frequent allusions, the German intertext in Mircea Ivănescu's work is represented by his numerous translations from German, as considerable and meaningful as those from English. They range from Kafka, Nietzsche, Musil, Broch, Rilke, etc., to poems from various German-language poets published in translation in the *Transilvania* magazine before 1989 (such as Johannes Bobrowski, Thomas Bernhard, Ingeborg Bachmann, Günter Eich, Karl Krolow, to name but a few of the leading names in contemporary German poetry), therefore testifying to his constant appeal to the experience of German literature.

While the Anglo-Saxon intertext is the most obvious one in Mircea Ivănescu's poetry, the French and German ones are at least as pervasive and fertile. Proust and Camus, on the one hand, and Rilke and Goethe, on the other, represent the *stellae fixae* in the complicated constellations of his allusions and paraphrases; besides them, innumerable other quotations or references to the French and German cultural sphere build the consistency of his poetic universe. The significance of this rich German and French intertextuality is twofold: on the one hand, it shows that Romanian literary criticism was a bit too eager to relegate Ivănescu's poetry in the wake of Anglo-Saxon postmodernism exclusively – and, given the fact that his four beacons are three high modernists and a pre-modern, it is disputable if one can label Ivănescu as a postmodern at all; even though the respective pre-modern author in question, namely Goethe, is considered by Jeremy

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15 Mircea Ivănescu, "Interviu," *Vatra*, no. 11–12 (1983): 14.



Adler, in his recent monumental monograph, “the inventor of modernity,”<sup>16</sup> one can still argue that none of Ivănescu’s most frequent intertexts is excerpted from a postmodern writer, which could be taken to indicate something meaningful regarding his postmodern affinities. On the other hand, it shows how intertextuality can function as a world-literature mechanism in accordance with Damrosch’s description: it is “a form of detached engagement” which takes the writer out of the frame of reference of his national culture and operates in his literature the “elliptical refraction” Damrosch sees as the first trait of world literature.

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<sup>16</sup> Jeremy Adler, *Goethe. Die Erfindung der Moderne. Eine Biographie* (München: C.H. Beck, 2022).

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