

A “COUNTRY PROJECT”: *CONVORBIRI LITERARE* AT ITS 150th ANNIVERSARY

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Abstract: This year, the Romanian literary magazine *Convorbiri Literare* [*Literary Conversations*] celebrates 150 years since the appearance of the first issue, on March 1st, 1867. The role and place of the “country project” proposed by the *Junimea* literary society’s members (“Junimiști”) who are the founders of the *Convorbiri Literare* - either being Western-educated persons, or gazing toward the West - are well known, as well as the manner this journal has been realized. But the image of the “country project” linked to *Convorbiri Literare* can’t be complete without considering some other value connotations of this literary magazine; that is the aim of the present article.

Keywords: *Convorbiri Literare*, country project, Junimea, “Convorbiriști”

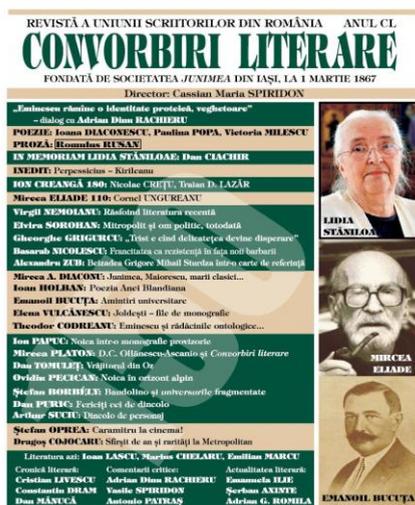
Since its first issue in March 1st 1867, the Romanian literary magazine *Convorbiri Literare* [*Literary Conversations*] has launched the idea of the “project country”, which needs to be understood - beyond the already well known aspects - by considering some peculiar questions that are revealed in the following; namely, about how the texts of “Convorbiriști” reflected the West literary/cultural concerns and also a certain kind of mentality planned to realize the opening on multiple levels towards the knowledge of the other peoples’ culture in the world.

I especially refer to “the sight” (away from the ‘background’ form, about which the founder Titu Maiorescu used to say that “it not only brings benefit, but it is damaging because it destroys a powerful means of culture”; and this, in reply to the need of understanding and recovering the gap as regards the West, and the need to develop an organic culture by respecting the natural course of the Romanian

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culture) both toward the West and East: seeing that the Orient has engrossed for centuries the Western interest.



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Deep changes happened in West as regards the mode of seeing the East, in general; for example, the “Eastern Question” encompassing a lot of elements and interests. One of the major contributors to *Convorbiri Literare* magazine in its first decade, namely the poet, playwright, politician and diplomat Vasile Alecsandri¹ was writing in 1855 to Ion Ghica:

“Crîmul [Crimean Peninsula] is now the most important land because there the Eastern Question is to be debated. There is particularly for us, the Romanians, the sacred placed where the future of our Principalities is decided.”²

¹ Vasile Alecsandri (1821-1890) still represents an interesting author for the literary research, especially for his peculiar approaches of the Eastern culture. For example, concerning Alecsandri’s view upon the Arabic poetry, Andreea Dumitrescu published in 2014 “Samples of written fușhâ and moroccan dârîza in Vasile Alecsandri’s novel *O călătorie în Africa* [A Journey to Africa]”, in the journal *Romano-Arabica XIV - ‘Āmmiyya and Fușhâ in Linguistics and Literature*, University of Bucharest Publishing House, pp.109-123.

² See Vasile Alecsandri (1885 / 1992). *Opere* [Works], vol. IV. Chișinău: Hyperion Publishing House, p.685.

In time fundamental books about Asia, the Ottoman Empire and the culture of this big territory have been written in Europe. I just mention about the works of the Austrian orientalist and historian Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall; also the *West-östlicher Divan* [*West-Eastern Divan*] by Goethe. No less, it is easy to observe that each of the powerful states was concerned with its own interests. So, an article published on April 1st 1877 by "Anonymous" stresses: "It is obviously that Austria earnestly and with great patience - that is typical ethnic Germans - follows its own goal in East, using all means possible."

In such a context, the "country project" aimed to make known these questions, including from a cultural point of view. Even though these aspects were not directly proclaimed, they were present in *Convorbiri Literare* through some translations, articles, and especially thanks to the personalities who signed them: Titu Maiorescu, Iacob Negruzzi, Mihai Eminescu and Dimitrie Bolintineanu (the author, among others, of "Nepăsarea la români" ["The Indifference among Romanians"], which is a text up to date in nowadays, too).

The problem was not well enough understood, always, in its all connotations; perhaps because a kind of fear was, as Michail Kogălniceanu wrote in his "Introduction [to *Dacia literară*]", in 1840: "The desire of imitation has become a dangerous mania once it kills our national feeling". In the same tonality, A. D. Xenopol was submitting for the March 1st 1871 Issue of *Convorbiri Literare* a text which will be published over 66 years in the jubilee LXX Issue (1-5), January-May 1937; the article is entitled "O privire retrospectivă asupra *Convorbirilor Literare*" ["A Retrospective on *Literary Conversations*"] and it gets the blame for the magazine of promoting *cosmopolitanism* and *antinationalism*.³ This is also the blame Mihai Eminescu has been charged with in the era.

On the other hand, it is obviously the West orientation of the literary magazine authors and contributors.

Thus, in the opening of Issue XXII of the 5th year in January 15, 1872, Iacob Negruzzi published "Către Cetitori" ["To the Readers"] that makes up a balance sheet of the journal, mentioning the translations of some important foreign poets like Homer, Horace, Jared, Tasso, Moore, Hugo, Lamartine, Musset, Goethe, Lessing,

³ Cassian Maria Spiridon (2017). "O sută cincizeci de ani de *Convorbiri Literare*" ["One Hundred Fifty Years of *Literary Conversations*"] (II) / 2. *Convorbiri Literare*, Nr.3 (255).

Schiller, Heine, Chamisso, and Geibel, also emphasizing a few questions, for example: “Slavici provides interesting insights into the Magyars – our old and present enemies -, which is a good thing to know about, and Mr. Caragiani gives us information concerning the Romanians of Macedonia who are our brothers; and yet other studies on native and foreign historians”.

As for the *Convorbiri Literare*'s charges of “cosmopolitanism”, Negruzzi writes:

To the indictment sheet that is not national, but cosmopolitan (this word to be understood as antipatriotic), we responded through original articles, short stories and drama out of the Romanians' life and, also, through original poems by national authors, through critical studies independently of foreign writers. The popular poetry, the national character study and critical study of our history, the desire to penetrate by any means the true nature and the characteristics of Romanian people have been and will always be the object of our reflection. Indeed, we avoided the patriotic recitations: words like *Romanian*, *Romanianism*, *Latin kind*, *Trajan's great-grandsons* and so on and so forth are not on every page, as other contemporary journals show, but we do not believe that these manifest the merits of a literature; on the contrary we think that their too often use emphatically hides a serious empty thought.⁴

Not merely the “Convorbiriști” translations and the names brought in Romanian language - which are not just a few and they are actually significantly chosen. For example, in the content of April Issue of 1870, we find Charles Baudelaire's *Bohémien en voyage* and *Don Juan aux enfers* translated by Vasile Pogor, and these appeared when the French poet was not too well valued in his own country. At the same time, in 1873, along with translations of Th. Gauthier, Alfred de Musset, Hugo, La Fontaine, Petrarca, Leconte de Lisle, Virgil, Heine, François Copée, Schiller, we find the so Nobel Prize disputed Sully Prudhomme – piqued my research interest as regards this important literary magazine published in Iași. But also the studies on Western arts, culture and history, and the manner of writing about these; no less how and why the “Convorbiriști” were following the papers about Romanians and their destiny that appeared abroad. All of these especially interested me. In this sense, I mention: *On the Latin Literature: Speech of D. N. Quintescu*; *A Glance on the French Literature: Speech of D. I. Meșotă*; *The New Year's Night of a*

⁴ *Ibidem*.

Miserable Man by Jean Paul; on the *Manual of Ancient Geography and History* by W. Putz, translated by D. I. Meșotă and Titu Maiorescu – published in 1867; *The Romanian Language in the Austria Journals* by Titu Maiorescu, *Essays on Spanish Literature* by S. Vîrgolici, *On Horace Odes and Epodes* explained by D. I. Munteanu, *Of Istria Itinerary* by Ioan Maiorescu, *Romanians of Macedonia and their Popular Poetry* by D. I. Caragiani (1868); the *Istrian-Romanian Vocabulary* excerpted from Ioan Maiorescu's manuscripts (1872); *We and the Magyars: A Study* by Ioan Slavici (1873), etc.

The "list" of the following years includes many other interesting studies in various fields - for example, *The Austrian Influence on the Romanians*, by Mihai Eminescu; names of authors translated by or about whom the "Convorbiriști" have written, such as Rabelais, Racine, Rilke, Molière, Verlaine, Cervantes, Hugo, Lessing, Chamisso, etc. Among the Romanian translators, N. Schelletti, S. Vârgolici and V. Pogor are to be noted.

A significant fact refers to the work of "Convorbiriști" in establishing diplomatic relations with the Japanese Archipelago. It was happening during the ministerial activity of Nicolae Xenopol, in the first decade of the 20th century. The younger brother of the historian A. D. Xenopol was a „Junimist” economist and journalist, who graduated philosophy in Berlin and received his doctorate in law at the University of Liège.

Nicolae Xenopol published many texts in *Convorbiri Literare*. At the same time, he was editor-in-chief of *Românul* in 1882, of *Voința Națională* in 1885, director of *Drapelul* newspaper and of *Țara Nouă* (1911-1912). He founded *Le Mouvement économique*, managing it together with A. D. Xenopol and Mihail Dragomirescu between 1904 and 1915.

As regards the founder of *Convorbiri Literare*, Titu Maiorescu, it's worth to say that, among his less known translations, there is (also) *Veduva necredincioasă: O poveste chinezească din colecția "Kin-ku-ki-kuan"* [*The Faithless Widow: A Chinese Story from "Kin-ku-ki-kuan" Series*], using the German translation of E. Grisebach⁵ (the former German consul in Bucharest). The text was firstly published in

⁵ See Titu Maiorescu (1882). *Patru Novele* [*Four Short Stories*], pp.185-194. In Titu Maiorescu (1986). *Opere* [*Works*], vol. III: *Traduceri* [*Translations*]. Bucharest: Minerva Publishing House, pp.40-56. The Romanian translation followed the text of Eduard Grisebach (1873), *Die treulose Witwe; eine chinesische Novelle und ihre Wanderung durch die Weltliteratur*. Wien: Verlag von L. Rosner.

Convorbiri Literare, in the 14th year, the Issues VIII and IX, November 1st and 15th, 1880, with the title *Istoria lui Ciuang-söng și a soției sale Tien-și* [*The Story of Ciuang-söng and of his wife Tien-și*]. To my knowledge, it is one of (if not even the first) translations from the Chinese literature⁶, even mediated by the German chain, in the Romanian Principalities.

In his turn, Iacob Negruzzi wrote three poems *Kaher*⁷ - describing the Abbasid Caliph fell from glory -, *Mervan* and *Iezid*⁸.

Undoubtedly, the name to be underlined is that of one of the outstanding personalities of the world culture, Mihai Eminescu, the great Romanian journalist and poet who used to say:

The individual is condemned by the time and space to work only for the part he belongs to. In vain he would try to work at once for the entire humankind; he is bound through unopened chains by the part of humans in which he is born.

Completely entitled at a rigorous analysis, Eminescu criticized the youth for the “rare lack of piety face the exceptional worthy of the ancestors, talking gibberish corrupted instead the beautiful language of the ancestors”:

These young persons have got the theaters’ sounds in the slums of Paris and, with such a large science, they returned claiming to quickly be(come) deputies, ministers, Professors, academics, and many other ‘professionals’ without any substance and work experience.⁹

The political writings of Mihai Eminescu testify his lucidity and his remarkable perspicacity to understanding the world he was living in.

⁶ In 1863, Constanța Dunca – mentioned by Titu Maiorescu in his 1872 work *Critice. Direcția nouă în poezia și proza română* [*Literary Criticism: The New Direction in the Romanian Poetry and Prose*] as living “in Paris and getting the recognition and applause of France scholars for her works about Romanians and education she has written in French -, was publishing *Mi-kou-se-fan* – a translation on the French chain – and *Hing-ho-Tou*. Born on February 16th 1843 in Botoșani, educated in Vienna and Paris, Constanța Dunca Schiau is the first woman-journalist. Since March 15th 1863, she published the magazine *Amicul familiei* [*The Family Friend*], as editor-in-chief.

⁷ It is about Al-Qahir Bi'llah (Abu Mansour Muhammad Al Qahir Bellah), the Abbasid Caliph reigning in Baghdad from 932 to 934.

⁸ Negruzzi explains: “Jezid II Kalifu in Damascus, belonging to the Ummayyad family (720-724)”. *Convorbiri Literare*, No.16/ 1968, p.266.

⁹ Mihai Eminescu (1877). *Icoane vechi și icoane nouă* [*Old Icons and New Icons*], Essays. *Timpul*, December 1877.

But this doesn't mean he would have a capacity to less comprehend the other worldwide nations and cultures. To not forget that Mihai Eminescu is the one who wrote in the Persian literary genre of *g(h)azel*, as we can find in his manuscripts¹⁰; also, the *motto* for his 1876 poem *Călin* is *A Ghazel*: "It is autumn – leaves outpour, / Crickets chirp under the floor, / With a trembling hand the wind / Knocks, woe-stricken, at the door, / While before the hearth you sit / And fall dozing off once more (...)"¹¹. At the same time, Mihai Eminescu was the first who, through the German translations, brought the Persian poet Ferdowsi – the famous author of *Shahnameh* [*Book of Kings*] poem - in the Romanian language; and...

Certainly, in quest for the value connotations of *Convorbiri Literare*, we must take into account what belongs to exoticism, to the so called 'Orientophily' of the European Romanticism of the mid 19th century. But it is obviously that, in the context of manifesting the national vision, all together complete the picture of the "country project" that the "Junimiști" and *Convorbiri Literare* have launched. Being aware of the geo-political situation and the general reality in which Romanians were living, they were able to show a clear and responsible understanding of the international evolution, and especially the emerging forces in the area of the Romanian Principalities, cultivating and forwarding a vision far away of a narrow and localist one.

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¹⁰ See Mihai Eminescu (1873). *Ghazel*. MSS 2286, 6v-8 and 2285, 122v-123. In Mihai Eminescu (1952), *Opere*, vol. IV: *Poezii postume* [Works, vol.4: *Posthumous Poems*]. Critical edition by Perpessicius. Bucharest: Romanian Academy Publishing House.

¹¹ Mihai Eminescu (1876). *Călin (file de poveste)* [*Călin (fragments from a tale)*]. In *Poesii de Mihail Eminescu*. Bucharest: Socec Publishing House, 1884.

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