

I belong to what I would call “the English-speaking” generation of those Romanians, whose low interest in the French culture is a matter of concern and a sign of decadence in the eyes of the older generations. Even so, I have always felt the French melancholia that is haunting the Romanian society and the Romanian - French links that are still strong. In Romania, the political, administrative, juridical and cultural systems follow French patterns and in turn, the Romanians have brought a notable contribution to the development of Francophony.

A part of this contribution is presented in the book Paris - Bucharest, Bucharest - Paris, Francophone Writers from Romania edited by Anne Quinney (Rodopi, 2012). This book is a highly welcome study taking into account that the Francophone space encompasses more than the territories of the former French colonies and that Romania is too little known for its Francophony. Perhaps this is because of Romania’s geographical position and historical background; it is not easy to guess the French allegiance of an Eastern-European country, whose Russian, Ottoman and German influences are better known than its Latin origins.

From the very title of the book we can understand that it does not discuss the literary connections between France and Romania from a hierarchical perspective, but, as Anne Quinney also explains in the Introduction, it highlights the intellectual exchanges between Paris and Bucharest, Bucharest and Paris. The French culture would not be the same without the writers from Romania, and the writers from Romania would not have done the same work if they had not had experienced Romania through the French language. There is no doubt that Tzara’s Dada movement, Ionesco’s Theater of the Absurd, Isou’s Letterism or Cioran’s philosophy of despair have a value that legitimates any study about the Francophone literary phenomenon represented by the writers from Romania.

The book comprises ten essays that are very well documented and whose clarity of style is highly appreciated. The contributors, outstanding researchers, have different cultural backgrounds; this is a fact that inspires a note of objectivity, a lack of “nationalistic bias”. The volume is opened with an overview of the reasons and the ways in which France became a “national obsession” and a “soul sister” for 19th-century Romania. Searching to define its national identity, Romania took France as a model, an ideal, as a mythological space to which Romania was akin due to their common Roman roots. Ever since many intellectuals of Romanian origin, regardless of whether they were living in the real Paris or in the so-called “little Paris” (Bucharest), chose to express themselves in the French language. By doing so, many transferred their Romanian heritage into the French culture and their French culture into the Romanian heritage and expanded the Francophone space. The essays in the book

consider the work of the most preeminent intellectuals from Romania writing in French in the 20th century.

Regarded as a whole, the book is a complex study, as it examines many genres, from poetry or drama to philosophy, and different artistic movements like Dada, Surrealism, Letterism, Traditionalism, Protochronism, or even Sufism. Moreover, an important merit of this book is the presenting of both writers whose names are still resonant, like Tristan Tzara, Eugene Ionesco, Emile Cioran, and “forgotten” writers, not so well known by the large public, but who, due to the value of their work, deserve to be brought into the light once again, as Anna de Noailles, Benjamin Fondane or Isidore Isou.

Quite obviously, this book contains academic material that contributes to the development of Francophone Studies. However, I assume that if this book had targeted exclusively the researchers of Francophony, then it would have been written in French. Given that French was the main international language of the last few centuries, whilst English is today’s main international language, many researchers and artists choose to express themselves in English rather than French. For them, but also for a reader whose mother tongue is not English, this book can become an empathizing experience, as the reasons for which the authors from Romania switched to French and their diverse relationships to this language are carefully analyzed. Also, when reading the book, one can observe the uniqueness of the Romanian-French and French-Romanian ties; even if today there are Romanian intellectuals writing in English, they do not necessarily regard London or New York as a “Jerusalem of Liberty”, as their predecessors regarded Paris, nor call Bucharest “little London” or “little New York”.

The connections between space, time, language and artistic expression are pointed out very well in the essays contained in the book. Matters of class, race, political ideologies and historical background are also taken into discussion in order to decipher the life of the analyzed authors and their work. For example, the Sufi influence of Anna de Noailles comes from her Ottoman origins, the Jewish origins of Benjamin Fondane and Isidore Isou were a reason that contributed to their settlement in Paris, the increasing power of the radical Iron Guard made Ionesco emigrate to Paris and gave birth to his *Rhinoceros*, as it equally marked Cioran’s philosophical career. Furthermore, by approaching issues of personal and national identity and sense of belonging, this book contributes to the shaping of a space where the language transcends the national borders: the Francophony. The Romanian writers who wrote in French became Francophone writers, which gave them a new “literary citizenship”. In today’s context of multiculturalism and free movement across nations, such a study makes us reconsider what we are and the national borders in which we live.

Anne Quinney (ed.), Paris - Bucharest, Bucharest - Paris,
Francophone Writers from Romania (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2012) | 3