# LITERARY EXCHANGES BETWEEN ROMANIA AND CANADA IN THE AGE OF GLOBALIZATION: YANN MARTEL AS A CASE IN POINT

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*Abstract: This paper overviews the literary exchanges between Romania and Canada which started almost a century ago and reached a new level in the age of globalisation. Drawing on the polysystem theory (Even-Zohar 1990, 2000), we will assess the role of Canadian literature in the Romanian cultural and literary polysystem in general, and of the successful author Yann Martel, and his masterpiece, Life of Pi, in particular. Also inspired by latest developments in Periodical Studies (Latham and Scholes 2006) and literary celebrity (Hammill 2007, York 2007), we will account for his novel and the 2012 film adaptation as received by Romanian publications in post-communism.*

*Keywords: Canadian literature, Romanian reception, polysystem theory, Romanian discourse on translation, literary celebrity*

## Introduction

If Canadian literature occupied a peripheral place in the cultural and literary polysystem of our country[1] at the beginning of the 20th century and was first received via poems translated by Nicolae Iorga and published in the periodicals of the time (*cf*. Petraru 2014)[2], during the Inter-War and World War Two years, apart from minor literary figures such as Bliss Carman, Canada's Mark Twain, namely Stephen Leacock and Mazo de la Roche, writer of popular fiction for women distinguish themselves. This probably owes to the fact that in an era in which, as argued in the Romanian Translation Studies discourse (*cf*. Lăcătușu 2000, Dimitriu 1999, 2000), there were no coherent translation policies and the rules of the book market were made by private publishing houses exclusively guided by commercial criteria, important canonical authors were left untranslated and sensational novels such as De la Roche's *Jalna* series and (fragments of) short stories by Stephen Leacock were preferred.

[1] As far as the method of our research is concerned, we opted for the Polysystem Theory as developed by the Israeli scholar Itamar Even-Zohar in the 1970s and later revisited by Description Translation Studies whose main representative was Gideon Toury, a scholar from the same area. Thus, according to the former theory, a literary polysystem consists of a number of contrasting pairs which show the status of translated literature based on its position in the host polysystem, namely: "canonized literary forms vs. non-canonized ones, a polysystem's centre vs. its periphery, and primary (innovatory) literary forms vs. secondary (conservative) ones. In Itamar Even-Zohar's view, translated literature can occupy both a primary position and a secondary one in the literary polysystem; the scholar distinguishes three cases in which a translated literary text may turn into a canonized literary work in the receiving culture and literature: «(a) when a polysystem has not yet been crystallized, that is to say, when a literature is 'young', in the process of being established; (b) when a literature is either 'peripheral' (within a large group of correlated literatures) or 'weak', or both; and (c) when there are turning points, crises, or literary vacuums in a literature.»" (Even-Zohar 2000, 193-194, *apud* Petraru, 2014: 54)

[2] Canadian reception was the topic of our doctoral dissertation and the results of our research were disseminated in articles published in various conference proceedings and reviews. See, for instance, "Canadian Imagery in Romanian (Para)Texts" in *Language and Literature. European Landmarks of Identity*, Pitești University Press, 2014, pp. 54-69.



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In the communist period Canadian literature takes a qualitative and quantitative step forward, thus moving from margin, closer to the centre of the Romanian literary polysystem. The rise of world literature as we know it today, the foundation of state publishing houses with coherent translation policies, of reviews dealing with the reception of authors from all over the world (*România literară/ Literary Romania, Secolul XX/ The 20th Century*) and the formation of reputed translators, great philologists of Romanian culture (Dan Duțescu, Andrei Bantaș, Antoaneta Ralian, Frida Papadache, etc.) are marks of the communist years (Dimitriu, 2000: 185, *passim*). Against this background, Canadian literature flourishes and translations from canonical authors (Morley Callaghan, Hugh MacLennan, Margaret Atwood) are carried out alongside translations keeping in line with the new regime (e.g. the progressive works of Dyson Carter). The Marxist ideology particularly shows at paratextual level (see the prefaces that criticise the imperialist order in both canonical and non-canonical works translated during the communist period)[3]. Anthologies of English and French Canadian poets, of Canadian short stories are also published in the era and Canadian authors are received via the most important Romanian periodicals which are also the ones mentioned above, i.e. *România literară/ Literary Romania, Secolul XX/ The 20th Century*.

However, the most prolific period for the reception of Canadian literature in Romania is the post-communist one. Thus, in the era of globalization more than 100 articles on English Canadian authors were published in important (on-line and printed) Romanian periodicals as compared to approximately 50 in the pre-communist and communist years, not to mention that genres that were previously ignored are now introduced to the public (this is the case of SF represented by William Gibson and his novels). As discussed by the latest developments in Periodical Studies, a younger branch of the history of the book, the availability of periodicals in digital form in the era of globalization and the digitalization of periodicals from previous historical periods facilitates research and the compilation of databases (Latham and Scholes 2006). With respect to our country, we can bring into play the periodicals available on digibuc.ro or Transsilvanica, the digital library of the Central University Library of Cluj, which are a goldmine for researchers, in general and for reception studies in particular, affording us access to the (fragments of) translations from Canadian authors and criticism.

**Yann Martel among Canadian Authors in Romania**

In terms of literary celebrity, Yann Martel is less famous than Michael Ondaatje, the author of *The English Patient* who "rivals Margaret Atwood in international fame" (Hammill, 2007: 159) and who belongs to the same category in which Margaret Atwood and Carol Shields are included, the contemporary writers that oppose Lucy Maud Montgomery, Pauline Johnson, Stephen Leacock, and Mazo de la Roche for the early 20th century Canada (York, 2007: 6). Thus, as far as Romanian periodicals are concerned, Martel does not hold the same central position in the Romanian polysystem as the major Canadian authors (Atwood, Ondaatje and Cohen), yet, he is not as marginal as the Lebanese-born Canadian writer Rawi Hage; Martel's position in the host polysystem is, therefore, similar to that of the SF writer William Gibson, the founder of cyberpunk or Douglas Coupland who dealt with the lives of the X Generation in his novels.

***The Life of Pi* – the Reception of Martel's Novel and Film Adaptation in Romania**

In the case of Yann Martel, two periods of reception can be distinguished, i.e. one before the film adaptation in 2012 and one afterwards. Thus, there are several articles devoted

[3] The issue was already tackled in our previous research, see for instance "Canada As Seen by Romanian Rewriters", *Modern Canada: Prejudices, Stereotypes, Authenticity*, Magatrend University, Beograd 2013, pp. 125-135.



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to his *Life of Pi*, published between 2002 and 2008; they refer either to the original work that received the Booker Prize in 2002 or to the two translations published in Romania. The first two articles, *"Viaţa lui Pi": Nemaipomenita întâmplare a băiatului care a conveţuit cu un tigru/ "Life of Pi": The Incredible Story of a Boy that Lived with a Tiger* (2002) and Felicia Antip's *Cu tigrul în barcă/ In a Boat with A Tiger* (2003) published by *Adevărul literar şi artistic/ The Literary and Artistic Truth* come as reviews of the original and the stress falls on the Booker Prize awarded to the Canadian author. Romulus Căplescu (2002: 11) introduces the novel to the Romanian public as a winner of the prestigious British award arguing that it was probably chosen by the jury due to its story that shares in common with Noah's ark. Like other international critics (Lisa Jardine) and the author himself, the Romanian reviewer claims that *The Life of Pi* is a work that makes one believe in God; furthermore, as a combination between an adventure novel and a religious meditation, it was compared to Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* and to Kipling's *The Jungle Book*. Apart from the biographical data provided on the author and the novel's summary, Căplescu interprets the main character's name, originally known as Piscine, as a symbol of the pi number and its magical connotations. This is probably a result of the main character's gesture to draw a circle to introduce himself. The article is also an occasion to speak about the Booker Prize and its intricacies, the Romanian critic making allegations on the jury's decision in general, on the criteria of selection for the books and the competitors (e.g. the American Pulitzer). Căplescu's critical piece ends with some considerations on the negative criticism of Martel's book (i.e. Robert McCrum's review in *The Observer*), claiming that other authors deserved to win the prize and justifies the preference for Martel through financial reasons. Moreover, Căplescu also mentions the plagiarism accusations made by the Brazilian author, Moacir Scylar, whose work had actually inspired Martel in writing his novel.

In her introduction to Martel's work as the Booker Prize winner, Felicia Antip (2003: 15) gives arguments for the selection of six authors on the 'short list'. *The Life of Pi* came out at Canongate, a less known publisher, after five reputed British publishing houses had refused the work. She also mentions Margaret Atwood and *The Blind Assassin* that was awarded the prize in 2002, a reference also made by Căplescu in the article discussed above. The sixteen-year-old Pi is by mistake turned into a fourteen-year-old by Antip, in her impressionistic claims that we are dealing with a Bildungsroman in which the protagonist is subjected to the most fierce conditions of life. The narrative technique resembles a 'network of lies' meant to convince the Japanese experts of Pi's incredible life on the sea, whereas the reader is seduced by means of the introductory chapter where characters seem to be taken from a 'spiritual comedy' that comes with 'interesting and novel information'. The myth of Scheherezade is brought into play when Antip discusses the 'nightmare on the sea' and she compares the accurate biological accounts in the novel with a chapter on animal behavior by the animal psychologist and ornithologist Konrad Lorenz. Like Căplescu above, Antip also refers to Moacyr Scliar's novel, *Max and the Cats*, mentioning the negative review by John Updike who inspired Martel in his idea for *The Life of Pi.* She concludes by suggesting an image of the novel seen as 'a parable of social order', in which the strongest survive.

Florin Irimia's *În barcă cu un tigru (bengalez, adult)/ In a Boat with an Adult Bengal Tiger* in *Observator cultural/ The Cultural Observer* and Magda Teodorescu's *Despre libertate şi salvare/ On Freedom and Salvation* in *România literară/ Literary Romania* are reviews of the first translation of the novel which came out in 2004 at 'Humanitas' Publishing House. Irimia's approach is a narrative one, the entire critical piece focusing on the subject of the novel, with an emphasis on the relation between human beings, animals (illustrated by the events at the Pondicherry Zoo) and religion (i.e. Pi's faith in God, his embracement of Hinduism, Christianism and Islamism). Irimia's final comment and interpretation of the novel refers to *The Life of Pi* as "a realistic novel about unreal events, written in seriousness and



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solemn joy" (2004: 27), a novel that would make us believe in God and not necessarily from an extrafictional viewpoint.

Magda Teodorescu's article published in the 'Translation Chronicle' combines a biographical approach with a narrative one. She starts by mentioning the impressive number of reviews devoted to Martel's book (more than a thousand) which announce that its author will become a classic whose works will be studied in schools. Teodorescu (2004: 26) explains this by the fact that the Canadian author rewrites the genre of the Bildungsroman in the 21st century without any 'visible premeditation' or 'experimental fury'. She speaks about a narrative which refuses its 'formal Scheherazadic destiny', i.e. the infinite combinations given by the name of Pi. In her discussion of the novel, the critic feels that the conception of freedom in Martel has nothing to do with the 'gentle philosophy' of Kipling that seemed counterfeited to Wilde. Moreover, since the main character discovers three religions (as a Hindu, be becomes a catholic and then a Muslim), Teodorescu agrees that it is a blessing to read about religion as simple human experience. These are the reminiscences of a Romantic philosophy that comes as a reply to Nietzscheanism in the beginning of a century that is marked by fundamentalism. She also makes reference to Michel Tournier's *Friday: Or the Limbo of the Pacific* where Robinson builds his world as time passes by; however, unlike Tournier's hero, Martel's Pi survives because he falls into oblivion, not counting the 227 days spent in the boat with the lion Richard Parker, named so because the officials had made a mistake. As far as the narrative is concerned, Teodorescu remarks that the second part of the novel seems dense and timeless, whereas the first one is subtly dislocated by the author's presence, as a witness and observer to Pi's salvation. From a philosophical perspective, the reviewer acknowledges the reason for this 'non-aggressive discontinuity' in the novel's structure as the symbols of faith are also saved along with Pi. She compares Pi, in his attempt to save spirituality, with Noah that saved sexuality, seen as a symbol of life. Teodorescu concludes that there is irony in the novel, the irony of a sceptic that affords to relax. This is illustrated at the end of the story by the reaction of the Japanese representatives to Pi's story.

The articles in *Cotidianul/ The Daily Newspaper* introduce the second translation from Martel's novel that was sold with the paper to the Romanian readers as part of the 'Literature Collection' (like Ondaatje's *Divisadero* and *The English Patient* and Gibson's *Neuromancer*). In *Yann Martel îi face concurență Seherezahei la spus povești/ Yann Martel Competes with Scheherazade in Telling Stories,* Ana Anastasescu presents Martel (2007b: 6) as a lover of zoological gardens and Indian culture. In the usual biographical approach of the newspaper, details on the life and works of the author are provided. Anastasescu also makes impressionistic claims related to his first novel, *Self* a story about the change of sexual identity, an Orlando of our days in the style of Virginia Woolf. As far as *The Life of Pi* is concerned, we are dealing with a famous novel (the Booker Prize is also mentioned) translated in more than 30 languages whose author, in order to write it, spent six months in India to visit mosques, temples, churches and zoological gardens, followed by a year of religious and shipwreck readings. In *Viața lui Pi, un nou capitol din istoria naufragiilor celebre/ Life of Pi, a New Chapter in the Story of Famous Shipwrecks,* Anastasescu (2007a: 8) quotes Margaret Atwood who compares *The Life of Pi* with *Robinson Crusoe, Gulliver's Travels* and *Moby Dick*; Ruth Padel from *The Financial Times* for whom Martel's novel is a reminder of Joseph Conrad; Salman Rushdie debating on the significance of writings such as *The Old Man and the Sea* and *Gulliver's Travels* and Gary Krist from *The New York Times* who found similarities between *The Life of Pi,* Defoe's novel and Aesop's fables. Other international critics that are referred to are Jonathan Heawood who speaks about the novel in *The Guardian* as a work that succeeded in eliminating all the clichés of the genre, Tim Adams from *The Observer* that compares the narrative strategies in Martel with 'dancing on the wire', Ulrich Sonnenschein from *Frankfurter Rundschau* who claims that Martel managed to



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reconcile zoology with theology and the well-known novelist Ilija Trojanow who was fascinated by the permanent oscillation between man and beast in Martel's work. The film adaptation, still unreleased at that time, is also mentioned, the Romanian average readers being reminded that the potential director, Jean Pierre Jeunet is famous for motion pictures such as *Amélie* or *La cité des enfants perdus*. The much advertised film adaptation would only come out in 2012 under the direction of Ang Lee. Moreover, the approach adopted by Ioan T. Morar in his article, *Yann Martel, Viața ca o plută/ Yann Martel, Life as A Raft* published in *Cotidianul/The Daily Newspaper* is centred on the interpretation of the literary work, as an initiatic journey; due to the circumstances, Pi is forced to adopt the role of Noah, not for the sake of saving species, but in order to arrive safe at the end of his journey (2007: 6).

Mircea Gheorghe's *Dreptul de a lua de la alţii: Viaţa lui Pi/ The Right to Take from Others: Life of Pi* is the last article on Martel's novel published by a Romanian periodical before the movie release. The reviewer (2008: 18) argues that *The Life of Pi* is the novel of a strange adventure told with 'talent' and also a novel with philosophical pretenses. However, it does not go beyond the convenient and accessible level of vulgarization of Paulo Coelho's literature. As far as the characters are concerned, they are mainly sketched out in the manner of short fiction, the single round one being Pi who is compared to Robinson Crusoe and Richard Parker to Friday. Gheorghe also claims that the novel follows the conventions of the diary, being projected against a setting that replaces Daniel Defoe's cannibals with the island of algae, edible by day, carnivorous by night. The religious side of the book is also stressed, the Romanian critic arguing that each of the three adopted religions is rather a Trojan horse for Pi, who dissimulates skepticism behind the relativity of the dogmas. Considered to follow the line of postmodern magic realism, the book can be read as an eccentric adventure and a story of initiation where the animal characters (and Gheorghe cites the author) are given human features: the zebra stands for exoticism, the orangutan for maternity, and the hyena for cowardice. Furthermore, he notices that the postmodern game of the novel is useless, irrespective of its cleverness since the explicit showing of textual bivalence is didactic and uncomfortable. The article ends with a note on the dispute between Martel and the Brazilian writer whose book had inspired him. Mircea Gheorghe argues that there is no limit when it comes to finding inspiration in another author's work as long as the result is a sample of talent and intelligence.

As far as the second period of reception is concerned, the articles deal with Ang Lee's film adaptation of the novel. Thus, Brăileanu (2013) assesses that the movie adaptation of *The Life of Pi* was not an easy task; however, the novel deserved it if we were to recall that Martel received a letter from the US president Barack Obama himself who congratulated him for the literary masterpiece, deemed to be 'an elegant proof of God's existence and the power of stories'. Cojocaru briefly discusses the film adaptation, reminding the Romanian readers that Martel (2013) claimed that if he had to choose, he would not have turned his book into a film. Still, the most accurate piece of criticism is Andrei Gorzo's *Pi, Dumnezeu, Bazin şi cinematograful digital – Life of Pi/ Pi, God, Bazin and Digital Cinema – Life of Pi* in *Dilema Veche/ The Old Dilemma* (2013). Drawing on film theorists (André Bazin, Siegfried Kracauer) who argue that digital cinema brought an ontological gap with nature, as opposed to traditional cinema which preserves it, Gorzo (*ibidem*) assesses that *The Life of Pi* only provides us with epiphanies before 'a creation of God', i.e. the tiger and the island, flying fish, clouds or stars mirroring in a Pacific Ocean so clear that Pi seems to be floating on it. However, this is a pixel experience and has nothing to do with the slice of life offered by traditional cinema.



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**Conclusions**

To conclude, after assessing the position of Canadian literature in the Romanian literary polysystem, which moves from margin at the beginning of the 20th century to centre in the era of globalization, we also established Yann Martel's place in the host polysystem. Thus, in terms of literary celebrity, he is as received in our country as William Gibson or Douglas Coupland, coming second after the most reputed Canadian authors (Margaret Atwood, Leonard Cohen and Michael Ondaatje). Generally speaking, the articles focusing on Martel's masterpiece *The Life of Pi*, either in its English or Romanian editions, both as film and novel, stress the personality of the author who was awarded the Booker Prize in 2002 for the work discussed. Few mentions are made about his other literary pieces, they are simply listed as less successful. The book is generally compared with works on a similar topic (*Robinson Crusoe, Gulliver's Travels, Moby Dick, Friday: Or the Limbo of the Pacific, The Old Man and the Sea*) which comes as no surprise since most Romanian reviewers, when dealing with the biographical presentation of Martel, mentioned that he spent time reading shipwreck-related literature. However, similarities are also found with other works such as Kipling's *The Jungle Book* or Aesop's *Fables*. This is probably due to the treatment of animals in the novel in the manner of the animal psychologist Konrad Lorenz (*cf*. Antip, 2003). The main character is compared with Noah by almost all critics and Pi's stories to Scheherezade's; in terms of power relations, Mircea Gheorghe identified Pi as Defoe's Robinson and the tiger as his Friday. The approaches of the Romanian critics are mainly biographical and impressionistic. International criticism is also referred to especially by the authors of *Cotidianul/ The Daily Newspaper* who, as in the case of previous novelists introduced within the same collection, employ a large amount of quotations from international reviewers of the work. Film theory is also brought into play when dealing with the movie (*cf*. Gorzo's references to André Bazin and Siegfried Kracauer). There are no articles of translation criticism and no considerations whatsoever on the quality of the translations from *The Life of Pi* are made in periodicals.

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**Acknowledgements:** This work was supported by the strategic grant POSDRU/159/1.5/S/140863, Project ID 140863 (2014), co-financed by the European Social Fund within the Sectorial Operational Program Human Resources Development 2007 – 2013.



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