IN AMERICA, A WRITER IS LESS THAN A CLOWN AND MORE THAN A TRAMP

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Abstract

The paper is an attempt at unfolding the structure of the iconic representations of America as expressed from various angles in John Steinbeck's works, and the way they were channeled and perceived in Romania and its political milieu of the Cold War years, through the lens of the cultural press, written both in Romanian and Hungarian. The paper deals with the translations of Steinbeck's works in the two languages, with the writer's confessions and opinions, especially those regarding his fellow Americans, as well as with the critical comments with regard to the multi-faceted reality approached by the author.

Keywords: John Steinbeck's works, iconic representations, translations, multi-faceted reality, culture

At the end of the Second World War, Romania – just like Poland, Hungary or Czechoslovakia – was 'entrusted' to the Big Brother from the East, the Soviet Union. The king had to leave the country, the political parties were banned, and most of Romanian intelligentsia – and probably the best – underwent the ordeals of mock trials or imprisonment, often being forced to choose between betraying friends and facing extermination.[1] Ironically, sometimes, "bad conditions were good"[2] enough for intellectuals to survive their fight against the communist evil, which was not a perfect one and, therefore, made room for culture as the only way out. The cases of dissidence were very few[3], they didn't have enough power to make significant changes happen, and so they "focused on an impassioned defense of the values of culture"[4].

But what was there to defend? And which were the criteria? Romania managed to escape the Soviet military occupation, a situation offering no guarantee that it was going to be successful in the attempt to "trespass the limits set by Moscow" (Nicolae 110). Following an extremely productive pattern, the consequences of which are still to be felt, history was rewritten – Romania's history, the world's –, by employing the criterion of class struggle. Literature fell prey to a prescriptive socialist realism, the nature of which underlines "the supremacy of political imperatives"[5] – strongly enough until 1964, when Ceaușescu came to power, only to experience a *defrost* in the late '60s and early '70s, and after that things got darker again.

So 'resistance through culture' was the slogan adopted and promoted by Romanian intellectuals, when trying to avoid censorship or the re-writing of national myths with the

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purpose of legitimizing the new society. There were, at least, two worth-mentioning types of response to this, in Romanian literature, one developing into a kind of *neorealism* – with its roots in the realism in between the world wars –, and another one, stimulated by censorship, a "codified, Aesopian type of literature" (116) that would resort to allegory and parable, acting "obedient and subversive at the same time" (116).

It is interesting, now that we have stated the frame of reception – a postwar former capitalist country from Central/Eastern Europe, on its way to socialism through dictatorship –, to see what was hanging on at the other end of the rope. What was there to be approached from a Western country in the years veiled by the Iron Curtain? What kind of literary values would appeal – or would be allowed to make their way into the consciousness of the readers –, to writers and translators, to intelligentsia 'behind the closed doors' of censorship? And especially when the literary works translated and promoted would come from the fiercest enemy of socialism!

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Right after World War II, America enjoyed the cultural authority of intellectuals, who had "the chance to be acknowledged as national agents of cultural, political and moral influence" (107). They could express their disillusionment with leftist ideology, which strangely enough, proved to be a good match for Hitler and Mussolini's fascism, and set the "exigencies of a new national culture, defensively secured against foreign influences" (107). A triumphalist cultural rhetoric was developed, as most of the study of American literature relied on terms and notions such as 'myth, symbol, exceptionalism and frontier'. And that went on for decades, in spite of the radical changes that took place and of the counterculture forms embraced after the age of abundance in which "everyone's slogan was 'I like Ike'" (108) According to John Hillis Miller,

> the most important books on the literature of the United States, starting with those written by F. O. Matthiessen, Charles Feidelson […] to more recent ones belonging to […] Philip Fisher and Harold Bloom have not been dedicated too much to descriptions as they were to the attempt to create a national unitary culture we do not really have."[6] (Nicolae, 112)

One of the writers who certainly met these criteria was John Steinbeck, who had already reached, before World War II, the height of his glory and of his creative powers as well, with *The Grapes of Wrath* – described, even by a later critic, in terms that are very close to those mentioned above:

> On one level it is the story of a family's struggle for survival in the Promised Land… On another level it is the story of a people's struggle, the migrants'. On a third level it is the story of a nation, America. On still another level, through… the allusions to Christ and those to the Israelites and Exodus, it

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> becomes the story of mankind's quest for profound comprehension of his commitment to his fellow man and to the earth he inhabits.[7]

"The Promised Land", "the story of a nation, America", "the story of mankind's quest" – all these are not just phrases/decoders quantifying different 'levels' of interpretation, but also a way of building a circle of self-preservation, aiming at a 'national consciousness', for the novel indeed functioned as a national American story. Not exactly a story of success, but of the contradictions that would fundament a modern and more powerful society, with better citizens.

The writer himself acknowledged, when he spoke about the process of elaborating the book, that while "pushing back the accepted boundaries of traditional mimetic fiction" (DeMott, xiv) what he had in mind was a certain type of participatory aesthetic. His intention was not to write stories that would please the readers, even if he was working within a traditionally market-oriented literary *milieu* and was witnessing the beginnings of the consumerist society:

> I've done my damndest to rip a reader's nerves to rags. I don't want him satisfied… I tried to write this book the way lives are being lived not the way books are written… Throughout I've tried to make the reader participate in the actuality, what he takes from it will be scaled entirely on his own depth or hollowness. There are five layers in this book, a reader will find as many as he can and he won't find more than he has in himself. (xiv)

In a superb anthology edited in the early '50s, the Pulitzer Prize winner is said to having been assessed in many ways by the critics: as 'primitivist' or 'romantic', labels triggered by his glorifying "eccentric and simple people who live close to the soil"; as 'realist' or 'naturalist' due to his emphasizing "cruel impersonal forces"; as a 'regionalist' for favoring as a setting "the rural area of central California"; or as a 'symbolist' for frequently employing allegory. (Pooley, 482) Almost four decades later, a literary historian stated that: "California, both as setting and symbol, provided the axis around which Steinbeck's life and imagination revolved. In his work, the venerable western myth was given a colorful moving restatement." (Conn, 413-414)

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All these aspects are captured from the very first article on him, "Vocea energică a lui John Steinbeck/The Fierce Voice of John Steinbeck", published in the Romanian cultural press, in *Gazeta literară/The Literary Gazette*, in 1957. The author, Alf Adania, a distinguished traslator[8], starts with an appreciation of the fundamental human values promoted by the writer, seen against the cynical state policy of the great monopolist forces. Steinbeck is also praised as an active participant in the campaign for eradicating the virus of McCarthyism. Actually, what we have is a comment on an article published in May 1957 in *Esquire*, about Arthur Miller's trial. The playwright refused to commit an

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immoral act, denouncing his friends, and his being trialed is seen by Steinbeck as "an immediate danger not only for Arthur Miller, but for our American way of life as well".

Another article referred to by the Romanian translator, "A Game of Hospitability", published by Steinbeck in *Saturday Review*, reveals the absurdity of the policy initiated by the State Department. They would prevent access to the US even to people such as the biblical Adam, "for immoral conduct", or Alexandre Dumas, guilty for having let some drops of "negro blood" to run through his veins. Such people would never be given an American visa; Jesus Christ himself would be on the 'black' list.

On the one hand, mentioning the name of Jesus was an act of courage from the part of the Romanian translator; on the other hand, the image of Jesus as employed by the American writer in his article laid the premise for an attack against American capitalist realities: "the sheriff would be very careful for the mob not to damage the building or the furniture in prison" after getting Jesus out of it in order to have him lynched. It was a cunning move, performing "obedient and subversive at the same time" (Nicolae 116)

From 1957 to 1969[9] seventeen articles in Romanian were published on Steinbeck, eight in Hungarian, and two in German, which made him second to Hemingway in terms of his Romanian reception. *Papa* was, of course, the great favorite of the readers, and also of the Romanian communist regime, due to his political gestures, more radical than of any other American author, and to his leftist views. Steinbeck had his share, too, especially after being awarded the Nobel Prize for literature, in 1962 – actually there are only four articles about him before the event, the rest of them came after: there are two, for instance, on *East of Eden*; three on *Of Mice and Men* and its dramatization; some fragments-notes from *America and Americans*; two articles on *Travels with Charley: In Search of America*; the very last one, from 1969, is on *Steinbeck as a Character*. When analyzing the contents of these articles, one must have in view at least two major issues: the image of the writer, as seen and assessed by himself or by the others – Romanian authors and their sources; and the images of America, as seen and perceived by Steinbeck and his Romanian promoters.

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Alf Adania, in the article previously mentioned, considered Steinbeck one of the Great Four – the other three are Faulkner, Hemingway, and Erskine Caldwell[10] –, who never subdued to the forces of darkness. A certain G. R. – we couldn't identify the author –, in *Tribuna/The Tribune*, rendered Steinbeck's confessions from *Manchester Guardian*[11], in "John Steinbeck despre el însuşi/John Steinbeck about himself": the writer speaks about his daily routine, about getting up early, setting to work at 8.30, writing 2000 words per day, reading everything aloud, trying to improve the dialogues. Steinbeck mentioned the importance of being a reporter and how journalism leaves its imprint on a future writer; he also remembered being fired because he had refused to write something that had been imposed on him.

The image of the writer got more prominent after he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. Another article, "Premiul Nobel pentru literatură/The Nobel Prize for literature", published in *Scînteia/The Sparkle* by a certain A. S. – again, the author could not

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be identified –, stated that the Swedish Academy was well-known for its political preferences. Yet, even if the author of the article was wondering why Pablo Neruda had not been preferred, s(he) admitted that John Steinbeck was an interesting choice, perhaps for resuming – with *The Winter of Our Discontent*, and given the long break after *The Grapes of Wrath* –, his position of independent interpreter of the truth.

"John Steinbeck: laureate al Premiului Nobel/John Steinbeck: Nobel Prize Laureate" is an article published by Petre Solomon[12], in another issue of *The Literary Gazette*. The author enumerates the American writers who had been awarded the Nobel Prize until then – Sinclair Lewis, Eugene O'Neill, Pearl Buck, William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway – and states that the Nobel Prize jury has not always been an objective one, though they were right about the American writers already mentioned. Then he moves forward to say a few words about Steinbeck's novels: *Tortilla Flat* is a funny yet frivolous book – here we may have a minor sample of socialist criticism; *To a God Unknown* has a title taken from a Vedic poem, but many of Steinbeck's novels have symbolic titles – yet the author of the article wouldn't dare hint at Saint Paul's discourse in Athens, in the areopagus.

Petre Solomon thinks that after *The Grapes of Wrath* – the climax of his work – Steinbeck went astray from the fertile bedrock of realism, but he never completely abandoned it; and that naturalism left its imprint on certain novels, not without certain qualities, *The Wayward Bus* or *East of Eden*; the Romanian critic believes that there were people, belonging to certain circles, who were discontent with the critical spirit of *The Winter of Our Discontent*, which must have reminded them of *The Grapes of Wrath*; he concludes that Steinbeck is the representative of a vigorous realism, especially when he places himself in the service of people and truth. Here, he resonates with the American critic Mike Gold[13] who "cheered Steinbeck, […], as the bearer of a true "people's culture" (Conn 413)

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The roots of this vigorous realism can be traced in the author's past. Just like many other American writers, Steinbeck had a troubled childhood and adolescence, being compelled to work in order to earn himself a living. His true universities, apart from several years spent at Stanford, were his jobs as a carpenter, painter, or journalist. In light of these facts, Petre Solomon points at the American realities captured in the novels and other writings: *Dubious Battle* is a revolutionary book, a fierce accusation against American capitalism, in which the writer is assuming the proletariat's perspective; *Pastures of Heaven* is an epic monograph of a fertile Californian valley; and *Grapes of Wrath* is the overwhelmingly emotional odyssey of an American family of farmers, abandoning their farm and traveling toward the deceptive California. We wonder whether the Romanian critic would have agreed with Peter Conn, when stating:

> Not far beneath its (*The Grapes of Wrath*) surface of melodrama and dissent lies a network of comfortable American verities. The reputed proletarianism of the

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> novel subsides at last into a celebration of the endurance of ordinary folk. It is the traditional democratic faith, almost religious in Steinbeck's formulation of it. (417)

The Grapes of Wrath is not singular in displaying the life of marginal(ized) people in America. In the article "Kék öböl. Szerelem csütörtök. Egi mező. [Három regény]", from a Hungarian periodical printed in Romania, *Utunk/ Our Way*, Huszár Sándor is reviewing the Hungarian translations of *Sweet Thursday*, *The Pastures of Heaven* and *Cannery Row*, published by Európa Publishers in Budaspest. When dealing with the characters of *Sweet Thursday* and *Cannery Row* – most of them marginals, whores, working people, representatives of the Lumpen proletariate –, the author of the article would drop euphemisms as the writers himself wouldn't employ them. He draws our attention to the writer's cruel realism, which mustn't prevent the reader from reading the novels, and his plea is for an 'emotional' reading. The characters should be treated with sympathy, even wrapped in a nostalgic aura: "One cannot love to such *extent* but a dream, a remnance of the past. Something that used to be once upon a time and now it's gone"

There is admiration, but also resentment from the part of the reviewer towards the contemporary American society as depicted in the novels, a dehumanized one, in which real values have been lost, their revival being possible only within marginal social categories that "bring forth the image of a lost world, an outdated stage of the social evolution". Apparently anachronistic, they shed innocence as bearers of "high humanist" values, therefore their integration within an "advanced" (consumerist) society proves to be difficult. "In a peculiar way, the reader […] has to realize that they, and their world, actually teach him integrity, honor, friendship and humanism.

Perhaps the reviewer is trying to push the readers forward into his own reading grid. He emphasizes the pedagogical dimension of literature. He admits relying on purely emotional criteria, and he proclaims that no matter if these heroes are true representatives of the contemporary American society he certainly doesn't want to abandon them. It is the epitome of the emotional mode dominating the review, objectivity is far from being looked for, and it is even avoided in order to set an emotional connection with future possible readers.

For this type of society (the consumerist one), the characters described by the writer turn into losers, while the values they embody are of no help. They are "modern Diogeneses. Characters despised by society, so pure and honest, just like the Amerindian, who is not familiar with the concept of private property and lays hands on anything he likes" As the real winners are the dehumanized ones, the greedy, the self-sufficient, those with a definite and strong property instinct, the author of the article concludes that John Steinbeck is not blinded by the apparent glamour of the American society.

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The stage adaptations of the short novel *Of Mice and Men* made space for more American images as displayed in Steinbeck's work. Thus, Stelian Vasilescu, wrote in

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Familia/The Family about how the author, in spite of being one of the great contemporary & humanist writers, and of being awarded the Nobel Prize, was somehow ignored, along the three decades of his activity, by the literary critics – but that was not the case with that novel in particular. The writer benefited from the love expressed by his readers, as a result of his being faithful to the principle of exposing tyranny. Following the same line of criticism, the author of the article praises Steinbeck for his overt social critique and for his work turning into a violent protest against American realities of his time. As for *Of Mice and Men*, the critic believes it doesn't betray the principle already mentioned. Inspired by the American reality of the fourth decade of the century, Steinbeck's work turns into a defense of the disinherited. In fact, it blasts away the myth of 'equal opportunities', and proves that in an inhuman society man becomes alienated.

When speaking about the stage adaptation at the Hungarian section of the State Theatre in Oradea, Stelian Vasilescu writes that the artistic and the ideological value of the performance is remarkable. As for the artistic value, the director placed the emphasis on typology and on the social coordinates of the issues at stake, the actors performed in a focused and sober manner; the setting served its purpose and the show, even if it was too beautiful, with too much light. And by making room for ideas and through accessing the psychology of the characters, the profoundly realist drama changed to a vey sad but beautiful poem. The sensational and melodrama couldn't find a place on stage and that becomes significant in terms of the ideology – either employed by the writer or favored by the author of the article.

"Ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals", said Althusser, "to their real conditions of existence", so it is about a lived relationship to the real. "I could feel", says the Romanian critic, "how much illusion was there in the plans of the agricultural workers envisaging a happy future", and he asserts – in a brave and accomplished ideological discourse –, that the main character's plan to get himself a piece of land wouldn't have made him a happy person, as loneliness would have prevented him from that. And he concludes that this is specific not only to a particular group of people, but to all average Americans. What is not there, what is silenced in the article – and we've learnt from Macherey that silence is the site of ideology in a text –, is the communist *credo* in common property, as opposed to the capitalist *credo* in individual property.[14]

The long and vanishing road from dream to reality is also present in another article, this time in Hungarian, "Egerek és emberek. A Nagyváradi Állami Szinház magyar tagozata", signed by Maria Kacsir, an attempt to comprehending the world created by the writer. "Steinbeck's American realism, a shattering one even nowadays", says she, "hides in the dense atmosphere accumulating around some apparently simple events due to the poetic aura that can be detached from crude epic situations." The tone of the article relies on the emotional component, on the sympathizing with the characters – the marginal people lacking any purpose in life, but who keep dreaming of something beautiful. Their story gets the "rhythm of a ballad performed in a blood curdling manner and with tragic tones."

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There are situations, some of them paradoxical, in which the image of the *good* writer overlaps with the image of the *bad* America, apparently disturbing the peace of the ideological realm of both the critics and (implied) readers from another/communist country. In "Egy iró erkölcsi halála/ On the Moral Death of a Writer", an article published by Dános Miklós in *Előre/Forward*, Steinbeck's attitude towards the Vietnam War is exposed as lacking dignity, according to the western progressive newspapers invoked. After a short excursus into the writer's biography, his modest origin – although considered 'healthy' by the communist party in those years –, and the fact that he had worked hard in his youth are taken as a positive trait.

But his statements with regard to the Vietnam War, the fact that he seems to praise violence and aggression, determines the author of the article to make use of a sharp tone, punctured with acid remarks: "one may feel like throwing up". It is about a text published in *Newsday*[15], Long Island, a half-fictional one in the epistolary form, dedicated to a fictitious Alicia, in which Steinbeck stated that "today would be a sign of stupid limitation to address the idea of moral consciousness, when soldiers kill people". The writer even promises a good spank from the old John to any militant pacifist. There is also a photo of Steinbeck wearing a military helmet, at the sight of which Dános Miklós seems to be outraged.

Since we had no access to the original texts, this may be seen as a de-contextualization, and therefore less creditable. Perhaps we should stick to the writer's statements when speaking about himself, and remember that he was not the typical American. He didn't enjoy standing in the spotlight: for instance, when being interviewed after the news about him being awarded the Nobel Prize, his answers were short and sharp ("The Nobel Prize for literature") In another context, he expressed his gratitude for being in a fortunate position, because in America nobody cares about writers. The truth is that they – the average Americans – must have heard about him, but they still take his works for somebody else's, and that happened to Hemingway, too. In America, he concludes, a writer is less than a clown and more than a tramp ("John Steinbeck about himself")

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So, when trying to resume and conclude our paper, if 'resistance through culture' was the slogan adopted and cherished by Romanian intellectuals – be they writers, translators or journalists –, John Steinbeck must have been an interesting option for the promoters of the American literature. And when trying to avoid censorship or the re-writing of national myths with the purpose of legitimizing a new society, John Steinbeck's work must have set an example. For, in the true spirit of the mixed mood pervading the Romanian literary background in the '50s, he was a realist who was also employing allegory and symbols, a *slightly* "codified, Aesopian type of literature", though never acting "obedient and subversive at the same time" And he has never been afraid to speak overtly about what was going wrong in the country of the Big Brother from the West.

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Notes:

[1] In a paper published in 2003, "The Ideology of the Canon – Romanian and American Approaches after World ar II"– of which we are making extensive use in the first part of our approach –, Cosana Nicolae, a Romanian specialist in American Studies, made several remarks with regard to the reception of the American culture in Romania in the years of the socialist regime, while drawing an interesting parallel between the political and social climates in the two countries.
[2] According to Andrei Pleşu, "Intellectual Life under Dictatorship", (as quoted by Nicolae, 109)
[3] The most famous was Paul Goma's, a writer forced into exile in 1977, after repeatedly protesting against the injustice of Romanian authorities and after having his letter – calling for respect for human rights – read on Radio Free Europe. He was the main Romanian promoter of *Charta 77*.

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[4] According to Katherine Verdery, *National Ideology under Socialism*, (as quoted by Nicolae, 109)
[5] According to Michel Aucouturier, *Le réalisme socialiste* (as quoted by Nicolae 110)
[6] As quoted by Nicolae, 112.
[7] Louis Owens, *The Grapes of Wrath: Trouble in the Promised Land* (As quoted by DeMott, xiv)
[8] He translated more than 40 plays by British and American authors, among them *All My Sons* and *The Crucible* by Arthur Miller.
[9] We have stopped, in this particular article, one year after the writer's death, in order to get a more accurate picture of the Romanian reception during his lifetime.
[10] A popular writer in Romania during the communist regime, due to the social dimension of his work, Erskine Caldwell maintained a kind of reputation after 1989, his last published book in Romania being *Jenny*, in 2010, in a pocket book collection.
[11] A newspaper with an interesting record in embracing and supporting leftist ideas and personalities.
[12] Another distinguished critic and translator – from Shakespeare, Milton, Dickens, Conrad, Melville, Twain, etc –, he received the Romanian Writers' Union Award for translation, in 1982.
[13] Mike Gold was the pen-name of Itzok Isaac Gold who, curiously enough for our research, was born to Jewish immigrants from Bessarabia.
[14] A complex position on this issue is provided by John Steinbeck when, in his *Notații despre America și americani*/*Notes on America and Americans*, undermines the view of America's history as a precious heritage, presented like sandwich on a plastic plateau. It is far from being like that: many of the first Americans were runners away, sometimes leaving behind order and safety. There was no easy conquer and no gifts, the first comers worked hard and even died for the land.
[15] In 1967, Steinbeck went to Vietnam to report on the war there, at the request of *Newsday* magazine. Steinbeck visited one of his sons in the battlefield, and he was thinking of the Vietnam War as a heroic venture, which led to his sympathetic, yet awkward, portrayal of the United States Army. As a reaction, the *New York Post* denounced him for betraying his liberal past.
[16] We resorted, just like in other papers devoted to our research, to *Bibliografia R. S. R.*/*The Bibliography of the Socialist Republic of Romania* – an extremely useful, including entries for all books and articles published in those years; unfortunately, it doesn't have a digital form yet.

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