The Reassessment of John Steinbeck's Work in Post-Communist Romania

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The aim of this paper is to explore the extent to which John Steinbeck's reputation and work have been reassessed over the two decades of critical reception in post-communist Romania. Furthermore, such an enterprise necessarily involves a survey of the communist reception period, as it will account for similarities and differences in the ways the American writer was critically read, reviewed, and translated in our country, as well as reveal the dominant factors (ranging from the development of literary criticism to political influences and ideological dogmas) that activated and conditioned the critical reception of his work.

A useful theoretical framework for our analyses is provided by André Lefevere, who holds that the selection and reception of a writer's work in a different cultural space is performed under certain constraints and for certain purposes. Control factors act both from outside the literary system ("patronage"), exerting their influence in the service of power through the ideological, economic, and social component, as well as from within the literary system, through critics, reviewers, teachers, translators who "adapt, manipulate the originals they work with to some extent, usually to make them fit in with the dominant ideological and poetological currents of their time" (Lefevere 1992: 8.) Accordingly, through "rewriting," literary works are manipulated to various ends, and this is even more obvious in totalitarian societies, where their production, translation and publication are done under state control. We thus intend to detect Steinbeck's image as projected by the Romanian critics throughout the communist and post-communist decades, and to signal out the manner in which their rewritings have influenced the Romanian readership's perception of the American writer.

The beginning of John Steinbeck's literary fortunes in the Romanian cultural space is marked by the 1942 translation of *The Grapes of Wrath* by G. Ionescu-Areff, a translation whose publication must inevitably be viewed within the context of both the writer's worldwide fame at the time, and of our country's openness to Western cultures and cross-cultural exchange. The postwar period (1944-1946) brought the first wave of translations from the American author: two versions of *The*

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Moon Is Down (both issued in 1944), Mihail Sebastian's 1944 theatrical adaptation of the same novel, as well as translations of *In Dubious Battle* (1945), *Tortilla Flat* (1945), and *Of Mice and Men* (1946).

In those years, the writer's popularity in our country mainly rested on his labor trilogy (*In Dubious Battle*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, and *Of Mice and Men*), and, even more significantly, on the propaganda novel *The Moon Is Down*, which chronicles the military occupation of a small town by the army of an unnamed nation (presumably German). The translation history of the latter actually proves that Steinbeck's early reception in our country was shaped by political history. First, the novel was serialized immediately after the 23rd of August 1944 in *Semnalul* (*The Signal*), a four-page newspaper, covering at the time WWII political and military news subsumed within communist propaganda. Secondly, Felix Aderca's Romanian version of the novel (*Nopți fără lună,* 1944) is the first translation from Steinbeck to receive a foreword, in which, however, the literary merit of the work is only skated over, as reference is made by the editors mainly to its antifascist message. Thirdly, the novel also garnered the interest of Mihail Sebastian, the renowned Romanian Jewish writer and playwright, who produced its theatrical adaptation (*Nopți fără lună*), which was staged at the Barașeum Theatre in 1945. Significantly, whereas Steinbeck refrained in *The Moon Is Down* from revealing the occupiers' identity, Sebastian's adaptation is 'uncensored': "the invaders" are called "Germans," "Nazis," "Fascists," and their "Leader" is identified as "Führer," and "Hitler." Acknowledging the inevitable modifications entailed by adapting a novel for the stage, we may however argue that the play was produced 'in conformity' with the historical context, as it perfectly fitted in with the cultural and political changes occurring in those days.

All these translations from John Steinbeck failed, however, to elicit a response from critics. Actually, it is not surprising that silence reigned until the late 1950s, as Romanians had witnessed the gradual Sovietization of culture, which brought about an embargo on Western models and was performed by propagating socialist realist texts in order to bring everyone in line with the Marxist-Leninist ideology. After a period of massive indoctrination into socialist realism (1948-1955), critics would discuss in their texts on Steinbeck only those aspects that were set on the political agenda. Rather than acknowledging Steinbeck's literary merits, reviewers acclaimed his work, and mainly his penetrating working-class novels, only to the extent it served them to perform a criticism of capitalism and an appraisal of the communist values.

Steinbeck's image as projected in the first articles (late 1950s) is that of a humanist, militant writer, who exposes the ills of the capitalist society. Accordingly, Alf Adania insists that the writer "takes an active part in all the eradication campaigns of the McCarthyist virus" (Adania 1957: 6), and Sorin Titel refers to his work as to "'a grape of wrath' against capitalism, a system that tragically destroys common people's lives" (Titel 1958: 2). However, Steinbeck's professional readers also argued that mere protest against capitalism was not sufficient and found him 'guilty' of practicing critical realism. Hence, a recurrent Romanian criticism to Steinbeck's work was that it failed to provide solutions and that it lacked a clear vision of the future. Thus, what seems to have actually been expected of Steinbeck was an explicit affiliation to the communist doctrine and an acclaim of the superiority of communism.

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The award of the Nobel Prize for Literature to John Steinbeck in 1962 gained the writer international acclaim, marking as well a turning point in the critical reception of his work in our country. Furthermore, the thaw in the Romanian political and cultural life from the 1960s made possible the issue of new translations – *The Grapes of Wrath* (1963), *The Winter of Our Discontent* (1963, 1967), *Travels with Charley: In Search of America* (1967) – and of several critical texts dedicated to the American writer. Yet, there are still no signs of Steinbeck's rehabilitation and his texts continue to be read tendentiously, closely following the Marxist interpretive grid. *The Grapes of Wrath*, *In Dubious Battle*, and the recently published *The Winter of Our Discontent*, which were the focus of the critical debate, spurred many political and ideological considerations. Thus, in his 1963 review of *The Grapes of Wrath*, Eugen B. insists on the ills of the American society, on the necessity to "struggle for liberation, and change the inhumane capitalist order" (B. Eugen 1963: 559), overlooking any discussion of aesthetic value. Alexandra Sidorovici's study proves anew that 'Steinbeck literature' could easily become a political tool for someone who sets out to decry the capitalist system. Arguing that Steinbeck's critical realism is a 'limitation,' the reviewer does not miss the opportunity to highlight the decadent morality of the American society and the "indisputable Soviet superiority in decisive fields of science" (Sidorovici 1963: 28).

Such texts obviously laid their mark on the way the Romanian readers perceived Steinbeck at that time. As Jeffrey D. Schultz and Luchen Li rightly observe, "Steinbeck hated to be labeled or categorized, and most of all, feared to be called a social-political writer" (Schultz, Li 2005: 90). Unfortunately, his fear proved to be well-founded if we consider his critical reception in communist Romania, where the mainstream ideological discourse conditioned the reviewers' assessments. Additionally, in accordance with André Lefevere's considerations, the critical discourse manipulated readers through oversimplification, and projected an incomplete picture of the American writer.

To be sure, not all the Romanian criticism on Steinbeck in the communist period was tinged with ideology. However, the tendency towards assessing the literary merits of his work mainly emerged in the late 1960s and 1970s, in the writings of Augustin Buzura (1969), Frida Papadache (1971), Virgil Stanciu (1972), Nicolae Balotă (1976), and Dan Grigorescu (1976), who brought forth original interpretations of the writer's texts. Whereas a continuation may be traced in the novelist's portrayal as a militant writer, a humanist and an optimist, there is more insight into his technique, style, and storytelling art. Thus, critics are generally pleased with Steinbeck's authentic voice, with his concern with social issues, his keen sense of observation and perception of human nature, poetic style, humour, and romantic lyricism.

The 1970s resurgence of critical interest actually came in the wake of new translations of books that had long remained unknown to the readership in our country: *Sweet Thursday* (1970), *East of Eden* (1973), *The Pastures of Heaven* (1975). The critics' response was thus triggered by writings that reveal hallmarks of Steinbeck's fiction: diversity of subject-matter, and literary form, as well as versatility in terms of experimenting with narrative tones and techniques. This entailed changes in the author's perception by the Romanian readers, for whom Steinbeck's reputation had been mainly based on the fact that he was a writer of social protest.

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Yet, this interval was short, as, in the early 1980s, translations from John Steinbeck have been brought to a halt and the American writer's popularity declined.

A true sense of reassessment of Steinbeck's oeuvre may be detected in the post-communist years, when we fortunately witness a revival of critical interest in his works. In this respect, the translation, re-translation and republication of the American author's writings play a significant part. Many of the already classical translations of Steinbeck's most famous books, which were made available to the Romanian readership in communist times, have been reprinted: Dumitru Mazilu's translations of *The Grapes of Wrath* (1963, 2005), and of *The Pastures of Heaven* (1975, 2006), Tatiana Malița and Mihu Dragomir's version of *The Winter of Our Discontent* (1967, 1993, 2004), Pompiliu Matei's rendering of *Sweet Thursday* (1970, 2002), Frida Papadache's translation of the novel *Of Mice and Men* (1971, 2005). Additionally, the 1940s outdated variants of *Tortilla Flat* and of *The Moon Is Down* have been redone in recent years. Thus, both Veronica Focșeneanu's version of *Tortilla Flat* (1993, 2006), and Octavian Roske's modern rendering of *The Moon Is Down* (2007) are high-quality translations that do full justice to the author's style.

The current reassessment of the American author was also possible because the publishing houses brought out books that had long remained unknown to the readership in our country: *The Pearl* (1993, 2009), *Cannery Row* (1995, 2010), *The Short Reign of Pippin IV: A Fabrication* (2003), *A Russian Journal* (2010), *To a God Unknown* (2011). Thus, Steinbeck's professional readers turned their attention to previously neglected works, as is the case with *The Short Reign of Pippin IV: A Fabrication*, which has been, as its translator Radu Paraschivescu (2003) rightly claims, unjustly relegated to a position of secondary importance. Arguing that many Romanian translations from John Steinbeck have mainly enabled readers to get acquainted with the writer of social concern, the Romanian writer contends that this book reveals a unique facet of the American author's talent, namely his ability to ironically grasp the absurdity of events that take place in a confused and vulnerable society. Accordingly, Steinbeck is described as "a master of sparkling irony, (…) and an archivist of urban absurdity" (Paraschivescu 2003: 26).

Likewise, *Cannery Row* was simply ignored by Romanian critics during communist times since it was first made available in translation as late as 1995. Nonetheless, it also failed to elicit response at that time, and only the recent (2010) version has garnered substantial critical attention. Significant insight into the novel is provided by Codrin Liviu Cuțitaru, who encompasses Steinbeck's literary contribution into a 'culture of the marginals,' which is, according to the reviewer, best depicted in *Cannery Row*. Further revealing that 'the periphery' is not an insurmountable fate in Steinbeck's work, but "an instrument of ethical resistance, a typology of virtue, a modus videndi" (Cuțitaru 2010: 8), the reviewer argues that the marine biologist Edwards F. Ricketts' 'breaking through' philosophy, which glorified simplicity, is transposed into Steinbeck's fiction, namely, that one can that one can reach impersonal truths through an art of the 'marginals', and an aesthetics of the 'peripherals.'

Apart from the previously discussed shift in critical focus on long-neglected works, Steinbeck's reassessment in post-communist Romania necessarily involves shedding light on the writer's political views, as expressed in his fiction. The survey of Steinbeck's critical reception in the communist period has revealed that his

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concern for people at the lowest economic level in society, and his scrutiny of poverty and unfair labor practices were 'critically interpreted' so as to suggest that the writer holds communist sympathies. *The Grapes of Wrath* and *In Dubious Battle,* the books for which he was ultimately known and judged as a writer of leftist leanings, were conveniently labeled protest works, and used as political tools against the social order of capitalism.

In this respect, Octavian Roske's enlightening prefaces to the recent RAO editions of Steinbeck's works play a pivotal role in the re-consideration of the American writer and his work in post-communist Romania. Accordingly, in the preface to *The Grapes of Wrath* (2005), the Romanian critic touches on the controversial issue of Steinbeck's political views in an attempt to clarify the manner in which they are reflected in this novel. Thus, he rightly notes that the American writer never aligned himself with the communist ideology, and that he actually adopted the formula of the New Deal, which has initially been disapproved of by the communists. Taking into consideration the manner in which Steinbeck resorts to the concept of social solidarity, compassion, and state interventionism, the message of the novel is incompatible with a Marxist solution of the crisis, which entitles O. Roske to assert that "Steinbeck never spoke in *The Grapes of Wrath* about the death of capitalism" (Roske 2005: 42).

Another important clarification concerns *In Dubious Battle*, which appears to have gained a world-wide reputation as communist propaganda, even though Steinbeck deliberately refrains from taking sides with either of the central antagonists in the novel – the communists and the capitalists – and confesses to have written the book "without looking through the narrow glass of political and economic preconception" (Steinbeck, cited in Lisca 1958: 114). As the influential theorist-critic Harold Bloom also explains, "nowhere in the book does Steinbeck show any theoretical or political interest in Communism" (Bloom 2008: 148). The book is about victims and 'monsters' on both sides of a 'dubious battle', which cannot be won by either the capitalist or communist side. Actually, what Steinbeck implies in the novel is that human beings are exploited for the advancement of an abstract (communist) cause, and this perspective is consistent with the writer's belief expressed throughout his work that the human being is more important than any cause or political party.

However, as we have seen, this was not the reason for the novel's warm critical reception in communist countries like Romania, where its message was distorted to serve the mainstream ideology. Accordingly, reviewers resorted to gross simplifications, suggesting that Steinbeck comes up in the novel with a solution of subverting capitalism, and even contending that the author shows "a manifest respect for the communists who sacrifice their lives for a future world from which others will benefit" (Sidorovici 1963: 26). Unfortunately, after having been widely reviewed in communist times, *In Dubious Battle* seems to be consigned to oblivion. First published in 1945 in Silvian Iosifescu's translation, and reprinted in 1958, it can nowadays be purchased only in second-hand bookshops, and it has been paid sparse critical attention after 1989. Still, in *Notes on Modern American Literature* (2001), Dumitru Ciocoi-Pop offers essential insight into *In Dubious Battle,* highlighting that "it is a book not so much of political ideology as of compassion

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and condemnation of violence" (Ciocoi-Pop 2001: 127). At this point, we are able to distinguish more easily the gap between the original, well-informed assessments of Steinbeck's prose in the post-communist years, and many of the critics' interpretations in the communist decades, which blatantly testify to the rewriting of the American author's texts so that they meet the standards of ideological acceptability.

The post-communist era has also inevitably come up with new insights into Steinbeck's work as a result of a wider access to the international bibliography on the author, and to the new directions in literary criticism in general. Thus, in *Travels with Steinbeck in Search of America* (2005), Emilia Ivancu proposes a modern critical approach to Steinbeck's texts. Drawing on the disciplines of imagology and mythopoetic criticism, she examines Steinbeck's journey and his "fictional destiny" in *Travels with Charley: In Search of America*, and *America and Americans* in order to reveal that the journey "in search of America" turns into one of self-discovery, and proves to be "a manifesto of modern patriotism towards his own country and people" (Ivancu 2005: 89). Furthermore, by adopting a hermeneutical approach, Emilia Ivancu also analyses the manner in which Steinbeck experimented with the usage of myth, archetype and symbol in *Of Mice and Men*, *East of Eden*, and *The Grapes of Wrath*. The author's contribution is significant, as her reading of Steinbeck's texts in a new, modern interpretative grid permits a more in-depth understanding of their complexity.

Similarly, informed by the latest work in linguistic and literary studies, Sorin Ștefănescu's study – *John Steinbeck's Narrative Technique and Its Transfer to Romania* (2005) – offers Steinbeck specialists a new avenue for understanding his narrative techniques. The thorough examination of the short-stories in the collection *The Long Valley* and of three novels (*The Pastures of Heaven*, *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Cannery Row)* prompts the author of the study to appreciate that Steinbeck is primarily "a writer of stories, which he refines and arranges in a novel form as separate chapters" (Ștefănescu 2005: 205).

All in all, the current interest in the American author's texts shows, as Virgil Stanciu rightly argues, that "when revisited, Steinbeck's work proves to be a lot more complex (…), lending itself easily to interpretation through various modern critical grids" (Stanciu, cited in Ivancu 2005:6). This re-examination of Steinbeck's writings has thus made it possible to reveal previously overlooked aspects of his oeuvre, and to introduce the Romanian readership to various facets of Steinbeck, the man and the writer.

No doubt, the post-communist period has been very dynamic in the American author's reception. As we have seen, the current reassessment largely depends on the recent translations of Steinbeck's works, the republishing of already classical translations, as well as on the insightful readings of the Romanian critics. Yet, the receptive process of great writers never comes to an end, being permanently enriched. Moreover, there are works by Steinbeck (*Cup of Gold*, *The Wayward Bus*, *Burning Bright*, *America and Americans*) that are still unknown to the general public, waiting to be introduced to the Romanian readership through new translations and critical studies. Even so, the Romanian translations from the American author and the critics' interpretations of his work in all these years have made it possible to contend that John Steinbeck's place in our country is unique and definitely assured.

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Abstract

The Romanian readership became acquainted with John Steinbeck and his work in the communist years, when his writings have been championed mainly according to the theme of social injustice and protest against capitalism. Fortunately, to this day, critical interest in 'Steinbeck literature' has not faded away, and new translations from the American author continue to reach Romanian readers. The aim of this paper is to explore the extent to which his reputation and work have been reassessed over the two decades of critical reception in post-communist Romania.

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