# THE IDEOLO(MA)GICAL MIRROR

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*Abstract*

The paper intends to reveal the ways in which the great American writers of the first half of the 20th Century were perceived and promoted in the cultural press in Romania, with a slight focus on Hemingway and Faulkner, during the communist years. We have also included some articles written in Hungarian in order to have a more comprehensive picture of the reception phenomenon.

**Keywords: communism, cultural reception, translation, hermeneutics, politics**

The starting point of our research happened to be a course in American literature that was going to be taught for our 3rd year students at Partium Christian University in Oradea. After having checked the information one could find in literary histories, monographies, critical studies and other sources required for such an adventure, we came to the conclusion that something more challenging could also accomplished: a study in the reception of the writers we had in mind, the manner the most influential of them have been culturally translated during the (frozen?) years of the *Ancien Régime*.

We felt it as a tribute we had to the writers and their agents – translators and critics as well, many times confined to the prison-bars of the *langue de bois* A tribute to those publications that had helped us to shape – during our first thirty/or twenty years of life, spent before December 1989 – our vision and our approach in the realm of American literature. We were aware that the discourse we wanted to deal with was a meta-discourse belonging to intermediaries and acting as an interface; revealing the strengths and the weaknesses of such a discourse would mean taking into account the special historical circumstances related to the idea of censorship. And that, of course, was going to raise expectations, anticipations, surprises and frustrations of the type Wolfgang Iser wrote about in the last chapter of his seminal book (Iser 274-294);

> The process is virtually hermeneutic. The text provokes certain expectations which in turn we project onto the text in such a way that we reduce the polysemantic possibilities to a single interpretation in keeping with the expectations aroused, thus extracting an individual, configurative meaning. The polysemantic nature of the text and the illusion-making of the reader are opposed factors. (Iser 285)



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We had to settle some landmarks and Ceausescu's coming to power in 1964 is an extremely important one. Four years after that date might have given us a significant temporal frame, 1968 being the year of both the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia and of the students' revolt in Paris. (1) We tried to restrict our approach to writers belonging to the so-called *Lost generation,* but the scarcity of references we were able to find, in *Bibliografia R. S. R./The Bibliography of the Socialist Republic of Romania* – unfortunately, this providential tool, including entries for all books and articles published in those years, doesn't have a digital form yet (2) – compelled us to make room for at least two other outstanding figures, William Faulkner and John Steinbeck, who seemed to have shared the feelings of despair, depression and anger that were present in the works of Hemingway, Dos Passos or Fitzgerald.

As regarding the last three, one of the things that puzzled us, for instance, was the enormous, yet understandable, disproportion between the twenty-five entries for Hemingway and only one, just one, for Dos Passos. For Dos Passos was as great a writer as Hemingway. But in 1928 he went to Russia in order to study the socialist system. Although a social revolutionary himself, his views on communism started to change. André Gide also visited the Soviet Union in the '30s. And he became disillusioned, too.

Has Hemingway ever visited Russia? According to one of the entries, an article published in *Contemporanul/The Contemporary*, on the 23rd of October 1959, the Romanian readers could have at their disposal the letter sent by Hemingway to *Literaturnaja gazeta/The Literary Gazette*, a Russian publication, with regard to his (intended?) visit. But did he finally make it to Russia? He surely made it to other countries and mainly to Spain. Many times for a corrida and four times for the Civil War.

It was during the Spanish Civil War that Hemingway broke his friendship with Dos Passos. The latter dared to report on the atrocities of the radicalized Republicans whom Hemingway favored. Papa's willingness to submit his name to Stalinist propaganda also disturbed Dos Passos. No wonder the Romanian cultural press, perhaps still under the influence of the Soviet cultural press, and of other institutions as well, more or less occult, made the author of *U. S. A.* trilogy almost invisible to Romanian readers. We would anticipate the reaction of official authorities in the communist countries against dissident writers and achieve the frustration engendered by the "translation" of this reaction in the cultural press.

> Consequently, we abandon the frustrating object and return to blind impulse activity. On the other hand, surprise merely causes a temporary cessation of the exploratory phase of the experience, and a recourse to intense contemplation and scrutiny. (Iser 287) (3)

Our contemplation and scrutiny went to the several categories the published materials fell into. The translations seemed to be more or less accurate, but those who are in the trenches of such a linguistic war know that things are far from merciful. *Nobody Ever Dies* by Hemingway, for instance, was turned into *Educaţia revoluţionară/Revolutionary Education*. And the



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first Romanian translation for Faulkner's *The Mansion* was *Vila/The Villa*, a little bit far from the proper Romanian equivalent, *Conacul*, which made its way out a few years later. And the Hungarian translation for *Light in August* was *Megszületik augusztusban*, which is in fact *Born in August*.

Not seldom we came across second-hand translations, as the one we identified in *Tribuna/The Tribune* 12 (21st March, 1959). In what is apparently an interview taken from *Books and Bokman*, Faulkner's words sound odd in their Romanian version: "I *used to live* in New Orleans", not an easy life, from the way it was depicted, "[…] And *then I have just met* Sherwood Anderson"(4) The mystery came to a solution when, at the end of the article, we found out that it had been reproduced from *Inostrannaia literatura*. But this *traduttore-tradittore* issue will probably become the focus of another study, a horizontal/comparative one.

With the interviews – taken by journalists, fellow-writers, etc. – we sometimes had the feeling of a continuous adjustment of the writers' statements, as if the same material was republished every other decade. "Life wasn't expensive in New Orleans and all I wanted was a place where I could sleep, some food, tobacco, and whisky." This statement is part of an interview published after Faulkner's death, an event that, according to the introductory note in *Secolul 20/The 20th Century* 8 (August 1962), engendered the publication of a lot of articles all over the world.

When asked about the most influential books for his literary career, Faulkner mentioned James Joyce's *Ulysses*. A few years later, in another interview published in a Romanian cultural magazine, Faulkner's statement was "enriched" with the remark that one should approach *Ulysses* with the faith of a believer. And last, but not least, in another version, we could read about the faith one should approach *The Bible*. We may consider a new formula for this kind of layering and topping, such as "interview in palimpsest", which may again become the focus of another comparative study. For it is not only about what the writers say, but also what their "interlocutors" were willing or *allowed* to convey.

> In the oscillation between consistency and "alien associations," between involvement in and observation of the illusion, the reader is bound to conduct his own balancing operation, and it is this that forms the esthetic experience offered by the literary text. However, if the reader were to achieve a balance, obviously he would then no longer be engaged in the process of establishing and disrupting consistency. (Iser 286)

"Disrupting consistency" also worked within another category we attempted to analyze, the one represented by the memories of journalists, fellow-writers, friends, family members, etc. That is how the readers got, in June 1960, "Going fishing with Hemingway", in *Viaţa Românească/Romanian Life*, once again the reproduction of an article published by a Soviet magazine, *Ogoniok*; an interview by G. Borowik, "The Writer and the Sea. Visiting Ernest Hemingway", published in *Rund um die Welt/Around the World*, 9/1960, was



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reproduced in *Gazeta literară*, the Romanian *Literary Gazette*, in September 1960 – they were very quick in reproducing articles from foreign publications of the Eastern/Communist Block, the communication channels worked fast. But could this have been, given the circumstances, a real type of communication? For a real type,

> according to Poulet, is dependent on two conditions: the life-story of the author must be shut out of the work and the individual disposition of the reader must be shut out of the act of reading (Iser 292)

Of course, Poulet was referring to the reading of the literary text. Our reading turned, in fact, into the story of the reading of the readings of Hemingway, and "a story gains its dynamism only through inevitable omissions" (Iser 280). One should start by omitting the reading of some of the twenty five entries on Hemingway, or by restricting it to the articles above mentioned, therefore readers should entrust (or shut) themselves (out of the act of reading) to this bunch of narrators, more or less reliable.

In November 1961, *Gazeta literară* received an article from Cuba, by Fernando Campoamor; the same Campoamor wrote "Papa, good bye!", in *Secolul 20*, in July 1962; in the same issue, Guillermo Cabrera Infante expressed his opinions on "Hemingway, Cuba and the Revolution" (5); "Hemingway on the Craft of Writing", also published in July 1962, in *Viața literară/Literary Life*, was another article taken from a Soviet publication, the same *Inostrannaia literatura/International Literature*; and last, but not least, *Secolul 20* – probably the cultural magazine that contributed the most to keeping the readers from Romania connected to what was really important in the realm of world literature – published, in the "far from merry" month of July 1962, an article by Ivan Kashkin, entitled "Talking with Ernest Hemingway".

So, out of the twenty-five articles about Hemingway until 1964, we had six Russian pairs of reading glasses, plus three from Cuba and one from East Germany. Anticipation fulfilled and frustration achieved. We would anticipate that much of the information might come, fragmented or distorted, via Big Russian Brother, but also from other Little Communist Brothers.

There were other sources as well, and for one of them we found it impossible to determine, or uncover, the identity, be it national or extraterestrial, of the author. "William Faulkner as seen by his brother", published in *Steaua/The Star* 8 (August 1965), might have led us into the temptation of placing it in the category of 'memories' shared by a close relative. We could find nothing on Joan Augerot – a half French half English name – who signed the review of John Faulkner's book, *My Brother Bill: An Affectionate Reminiscence.* (S)He did it without mentioning the publishing house and complaining, at the end of his/her 'short' excursus, that, given the knowledge and understanding he had of his brother's life



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and work, John Faulkner could have offered us much more than "an affectionate reminiscence".

Yet the question persisting in our mind does not relate to John Faulkner, but to Joan Augerot. Was (s)he French, English or American? Was it just a penname employed by a Romanian critic or translator? Unlike Joan Augerot, John Howard Lawson, who *produced* a heavily social general presentation of Faulkner, *reproduced* from *Inostrannaia Literatura*, is *introduced*, to the readers of *Secolul 20*, as an "outstanding American historian and art critic". The only John Howard Lawson we were able to find anything of significance about was American indeed, but remembered, above all, as the head of the Hollywood division of the American Communist Party. He is also praised for his activity as a playwright and script-writer. Another unreliable narrator? Should he shake hands with Ivan Kashkin – "whose work on Hemingway remains among the better assessments of his style – and who, by 1935, had analyzed all the writer's work to date and believed that they presented a consistent philosophy." (Trogdon 156)? Or with Guillermo Cabrera Infante, for instance, a famous Cuban novelist, essayist, translator and critic, arrested and imprisoned under the Batista regime, but who went into exile after 1965? (6)

There is probably no other option than giving credit to all the persons involved in the process of promoting the works of Hemingway, and Faulkner, and other American writers, in times of sorrow for the Eastern-European countries, be they journalists, writers, translators etc., and take their stories for granted up to the extent the information provided is verifiable and valuable.

Anyway, from 1964 to 1968, the number of entries increased, sometimes in a spectacular manner, but there were still writers mysteriously subjected to an invisible law of *omertá*.(7) We could find nothing on Fitzgerald, still, and Dos Passos only made it to five entries. Faulkner's shares raised from twelve to thirty-eight, Steinbeck's from eight to twenty-three, and Hemingway's, of course, from twenty-five to seventy-three.

It is only within this temporal frame that the first articles written in Hungarian appeared in the cultural press published in Romania, and they follow, more or less, the pattern employed in other publications. Vera Péter, for instance, in *Utunk/Our way* (1966, December 9), reproduces an interview initially published in *Literaturnaja Gazeta* (from October the same year – as we have said, the communication channels worked very fast). The title of the article is "The Writer's Personal Life and the Public" and it refers, among other issues, to a trial lost by Hemingway's widow, Mary Hemingway, who believed that her husband's personal life shouldn't be made public. Mary took A. E. Hotchner, the author of *Papa Hemingway*,(8) to court, asserting that the book invaded the right to privacy to which she herself was entitled.



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An American reporter from *Look* conducted the interview in which, for the first time, Mary Hemingway admitted that her husband had committed suicide, a decision he took because of his illness. "He wouldn't subject to it," said the widow, "he wouldn't die in his bed". An emphasis is placed on the fact that up to his last day, the writer was working in order to finish the texts of *Dangerous Summer* and *A Moveable Feast.*(9) He would write enormously, but he was reluctant to publish the stuff he had produced, and kept the manuscripts, some of them unfinished, in a bank vault in Cuba.

> "After Hemingway's suicide and despite the virtual state of war between Cuba and the United States after the 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion, President Kennedy helped arrange for Mrs. Hemingway to return to Finca Vigia, which President Castro planned to turn into a museum, to retrieve her husband's belongings, …." (Trogdon 356) (10)

Tibor Balint, in *Utunk* (1967, March 24), writes about *Light in August*, published in Bucharest, emphasizing the issue of the still pervading racism in a 'doomed South'. The novel is corroborated with the entire work of the writer, capable of "astonishing not only the European reader, but the American as well, who can see with eyes wide open what can hide under surfaces once they have been abandoned". The metamorphoses within this microunivers, dominated by "deviated impulses", affect the destiny of the main characters. The novel could have also been 'framed' as a 'detective' novel, but one may encounter a real challenge in assuming the Faulkner would ever subscribe to any formal constraint. The article seems to be a coherent and well articulated analysis.

In fact, most of the articles we came across were fairly decent attempts to promote values belonging to a space ideologically "alien", which made their authors' task rather difficult. We opened Pandora's box but we couldn't find striking dissimilarities between the discourses handled by the Romanian intermediaries and their Russian, Cuban, German and Hungarian colleagues/brothers in arms. On the other hand, since Hemingway and Faulkner were by far, in the '60s, the most translated and debated of the American writers in their generation, we have decided, for the time being, to build a little case study around them and go for a vertical approach, and not a horizontal/comparative one. We are confident that the significant amount of references, and information, lying ahead, will provide a more complex and colorful image of the story we intend to unfold.

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**NOTES:**

(1) Actually, Ceauşescu was the only communist leader who expressed his opposition with regard to the aggression, therefore attracting the sympathy of Western countries and making people of Romania hope that the "glorious road to socialism" will take a different turn in their country.

(2) We resorted to the collections of the Oradea University Library and of Bihor County Library, being therefore indebted to the persons in the two institutions that helped us to navigate through and sort the necessary information, and to whom we would like to express our gratitude.

(3) Iser is quoting here B. Ritchie, "The Formal Structure of the Aesthetic Object," from *The Problems of Aesthetics*, ed. Eliseo Vivas and Murray Krieger (New York, 1965), pp. 230 fw.

(4) „Trăiam la New Orleans [şi lucram din când în când pe unde apucam, ca să câştig ceva bani.] Atunci mă întâlnii cu Sherwood Anderson." (p. 12)

(5) Article reproduced from the Cuban publication *Lunes de Revolucion*, a supplement to the Communist newspaper *Revolución*, later prohibited by Fidel Castro.

(6) His 1966 novel, *Tres Tristes Tigres*, was labeled by Brian McHale as an extremely relevant postmodernist text with respect to technical innovations. Guillermo Cabrera Infante also co-wrote the script for the 1971 cult film *Vanishing Point*.

(7) The "code of silence", common in areas of Southern Italy, where criminal organizations like Mafia and Camorra are strong; actually, this code goes a long way back in history, being adopted in Sicily during the 16th century as a way of opposing Spanish rule.

(8) Published in 1966, by Random House.

(9) Péter Vera also announces the forthcoming translation of the two books already mentioned.



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(10) Robert W. Trogdon reproduces, in *Ernest Hemingway A Literary Reference*, an article published by Ralph Blumenthal in *The New York Times*, in August 1968, entitled "A New Book By Hemingway Blend of Life and Fiction Tells of African Bride".



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