Practices of (self)exclusion. 'Minority' and 'marginality' within Romanian literature

Oana FOTACHE DUBĂLARU

Being part of the European literary system has almost been an obsession for Romanian writers since the advent of Romanticism during the first half of the 19th c. At that time, Europeanization was translated in the literary field as the introduction of French genres, modes, and rhetoric. Several other cultural influences were to follow, the accommodation of which, against the background of what came to be termed as "national spirit", could not dislocate the perception of irrelevance and marginality that haunted the Romanian intellectual imaginary for over a century. A very consistent debate was carried in the philosophical circles between the two world wars on the topic of cultural minority, to be later reiterated in the 1970s-1980s, as part of a political agenda.

In this context, my paper will analyze how the awareness of participating to a minor literary culture could lead to developing an inferiority complex that sometimes took the guises of negation and/or exaggeration. The ambiguity that was displayed by most of the literary critics and historians towards reintegrating exile writers into the national literary canon is one very conspicuous feature of this attitude. Also, the paper will discuss the various interpretations of 'minority' with Romanian literary and cultural critics.

Key-words: Romanian literature, minor literary culture, exile, nationalism, literary canon

The current Romanian idea of a minor literature/ culture seems to be mainly and largely understood as an adaptation (that was meant to be critical, but actually lacks a deeper contextualizing) of the North American concept formulated within the discourse of political correctness. Nowadays this understanding implies a revaluation of local interests, values and topics (for instance, literature written in the historical provinces that were or still are geographically or politically situated outside the cultural center; feminine literature; literature produced by Hungarian, German, or Jewish authors, either written in Romanian or in their respective languages; exile literature). On the other side, the main actors in the literary field tend to favor the historically legitimized narrative that interprets the whole corpus of Romanian litera-

BDD-A30720 © 2018 Editura Universității din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:52:53 UTC)

ture as a minor one when compared to the great literatures of the West, and also as a peripheric one, in the same context, due to a geopolitical destiny that came to be transformed into a cultural complex (ambivalent, as these representations usually are). Reactions of revolt and lament triggered by this "cultural fate" have coexisted with attempts to assert the intrinsic value of a culture that is by no means inferior for its lack of recognition and deserves to be promoted through its specific qualities.

These persistent and conflicting discourses have been part of a complex cultural battle that was perpetually fought during Romanian modernity. In this context, the notion of "minor literature" as defined by G. Deleuze and F. Guattari in their famous book on Kafka had but a restricted circulation within Romanian literary studies, lacking significant local applications and debates. (A similar pattern is diagnosed within Bulgarian literature by Galin Tihanov, in his article *Do "Minor Literatures" Still Exist?*- Tihanov 2014: 169-190). This is why I find it more interesting to focus here on retracing the main moments of a literary/cultural history that defined in its own terms the notions of "minor" and "marginal", in order to finally look after correlations and encounters with the larger international debate on these topics.

The debate over the status of minor and major cultures was carried out in the interwar period with the strong awareness that such concern dramatically marks the unfortunate representatives of minor cultures. They approach such a theme from the perspective of the other, major cultures (particularly the French one, in Romania's case) that look down on its cultural receivers. „Nu este deloc comod să te fi născut într-o ţară de a doua mână" / „It is not at all comfortable to have been born in a second-rate country", wrote the philosopher Emil Cioran in 1936, in his *Schimbarea la faţă a României*/ *The Transfiguration of Romania*.

When it comes to the objective criteria that might be put to use to classify cultures, genres, or techniques into major or minor, classical aesthetics resorted to questions of specific material and durability (to distinguish minor arts such as pottery or gardening from major ones such as sculpture and architecture; or minor genres such as the fable or the anecdote, from major ones, such as the novel). The predetermined minor character of such species did not prevent them from flourishing during certain periods and producing remarkable examples of their kind. More recently, pragmatic criteria came into place, and the translatability or the circulation capacity of a work/ corpus of works became decisive in establishing their worldliness and canonicity. In the case of Romanian literature, cultural theory and philosophy traditionally looked at it in the framework of a general theory of acculturation and consequently, of a strategy of synchronizing with the great values of the civilized Western Europe in not only cultural, but also societal terms. Here are some influential explanations provided by Romanian thinkers and cultural critics.

BDD-A30720 © 2018 Editura Universității din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:52:53 UTC)

Writer and philosopher Lucian Blaga (1895-1961) treated the issue of cultural axiology in one of his masterworks, *Trilogia culturii (The Trilogy of Culture,* 1944). His argument, theoretically influenced by phenomenology and marked by a traditionalist train of thought, starts from the contemporary philosophical distinction between minor and major cultures seen as equivalent to that between two cultural ages: childhood and maturity. In this biological analogy, minor cultures illustrate the ethnographic type and a childhood stage, whereas major cultures correspond to the time of maturity. Blaga's demonstration proceeds by interpreting the two ages not as consecutive phases of development but as "adoptive ages" that function as cultural metaphors for a national group's creative processes. In order to legitimize minor cultures (alongside with the Romanian one) the interwar philosopher attributes them a certain cosmic character, in the etymological sense of "order" and "harmony", as well as a mythical one, to be found in their original rural space. Inside the framework of a minor culture, every creative individual stands for the undifferentiated collectivity (for instance, the anonymous author of a fairy tale, or the painter of a church working in accordance with tradition). On the contrary, major cultures privilege the individual in his/her originality and they also value a higher degree of specialization of the artistic fields. Another difference concerns the sense of history, which is regarded as a feature peculiar only to major cultures, while minor ones evolve in the context of a very stable, almost unchanging traditional paradigm. For all these reasons, Blaga believed that it was very difficult to establish a cultural hierarchy to account for such complex patterns of characteristics. (A vision which nowadays the reader might be tempted to overinterpret as a quasi-deconstructive attempt.)

Another very strong tone is to be found in Emil Cioran's last book published in Romania (*The Transfiguration of Romania,* mentioned above), before settling in France for the rest of his life: that of a radical critique targeting Romanian culture as a minor one. In his view, which was visibly influenced by the historicist style of his age, in a Spenglerian vein, minor cultures live a tragic life, since history is the work of major cultures (in the large sense of the word that includes Ancient Egypt and Greece, Modern France, Germany, or Russia, during different periods of their particular histories). It is the latter ones that provide thorough solutions for the spiritual questions of humanity. Major cultures work by individualizing their creations at every level: political, artistic, etc. Among their conspicuous features are: a stable generative center, the historical instinct, and also, particularly, their spiritual propensity. Cioran believes this vision also explains the so-called Roman paradox: a great nation that is not supported by a great culture, since imperialism is not a sufficient criterion in order to qualify it as such. An organic rhythm of development or a traditionalist vision are not defining criteria either, as they might lead to cultural stagnation (as it happened to the Byzantine cultural/spiritual area that was so valued by Blaga, but which Cioran blamed for ha-

BDD-A30720 © 2018 Editura Universității din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:52:53 UTC)

ving prevented the modern development of Russia and Romania). There is a very prominent Romantic vision active in Cioran's main criterion, that of historical offensive, together with a Nietzschean influence manifest in the proud-spirited feeling of importance that a great culture instills in the individuals representing it.

The interwar period was regarded by many cultural theorists and historians as the age when Romania was most synchronized with Europe, in economic and socio-cultural terms. While the champions of modernity (for instance, literary critic and sociologist E. Lovinescu) advocated the need to rapidly adopt and adapt Western models that could aid the country's development, other voices insisted on admitting that Romania had became a cultural colony of France, devoid of originality, "a nation of cultural consumers" (B. Fondane). Romanian-French writer Barbu Fundoianu/ Benjamin Fondane (1898-1944) disregarded the optimism of many authors who were in search of a strong legitimizing narrative for Romania on the international cultural market: "The history of Romanian culture was only the sum total of the ways it adopted European culture"[5], he wrote in *Imagini și cărți/Images and Books* (Fundoianu 1980: 198). And he further adds: "We are a Latin people since we thought we are, that is, some 300 years ago. Our culture then brought its own specific and greatest contribution; the idea of our Latin origin is exclusively a cultural product but also echoing in the political sphere. If it pushed us towards France and if our mission of a French colony was inevitable, that was a consequence of the premise that we are Latins"[6] (((Fundoianu 1980: 201).

A strong reaction of refusal was to be found, at that time, in the essays of Eugen Ionescu/ Eugène Ionesco (1909-1994), before his departure for France. His volume of literary criticism *Nu/ No,* published in Romania in 1934, depicts in the harsh tones of a pamphlet the mainstream cultural landscape of the age – its modernist section, to be more precise. Yet for the decades to come other versions of the story were more influential, for obvious reasons: the cultural philosophy of Constantin Noica (1909-1987), a prominent member of the '27 Generation, and the literary criticism and ideology of G. Călinescu (1899-1965). I will only briefly point out to Noica's vision, then discuss G. Călinescu's view on the evolution of Romanian literature.

Besides geographical observations, C. Noica employs a quantitative criterion for evaluating cultural creation. Thus, in his *Jurnal de idei/ Idea Journal* (posthumously published in 1991), he wrote that the *village,* as a societal

[5] „Istoria culturii române a fost deci numai suma mijloacelor de înfiare a culturii europene".

[6] „Suntem latini, de când credem că suntem, adică de vreo 300 de ani. Cultura noastră a adus atunci singura ei notă specifică și cea mai mare; ideea latinității noastre e un produs exclusiv cultural, dar cu roade culturale și politice. Dacă ea ne-a împins spre Franța și dacă rolul nostru de colonie a Franței a fost inevitabil, aceasta e o consecință a premisei că suntem latini".

BDD-A30720 © 2018 Editura Universității din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:52:53 UTC)

form that could expand only to max. 500 inhabitants, produces a culture of the folkloric type. (Here by "folkloric", the reader might rightly understand „minor".) A distinct spiritual model would be that of the *city,* that requires around 50,000 people (for instance, Ancient Greek or the Italian Renaissance cultures). Finally, the most complex model is that of the *nation*, that makes possible a "whole", "full" culture in the actual conditions of a population around 50 million (numbers valid only for Europe; there's a totally different scale active in Asia). His point of view is that a great/major Romanian culture is still possible, as the objective social conditions for its development do exist. Despite the sociological appearance, his philosophy actually combines classical idealism with a traditional, organicist vision.

Within the literary field, the strongest ideological influence in this matter was exerted by the interwar literary critic and historian G. Călinescu. There are several reasons for this. As the theorist Mircea Martin explains (2002), the Romanian 1950s saw the conversion of nationalism into a subversive value due to the prominence of the international communist doctrine; in relation to that, starting with the more liberal times of the 1960s, a cultural battle in the name of aesthetic autonomy was launched, following the prolonged dominance of party-approved ideological and ethical pseudo-values. Călinescu's major work, *Istoria literaturii române de la origini până în prezent/ History of Romanian Literature from Its Origins up to Present Times* (1941), while brilliantly opening a tradition and a genre, quite in line with similar European histories (e.g. Francesco De Sanctis' *Storia della letteratura italiana,* 1870-1), and striving to "free national literature from its inferiority complexes in the European context" (Martin, 2002: 10), also blocked the methodological perspective for decades. In his attempt to overcome the minuses of a quite young literature, and a peripheric one in the European cultural geography, endowed with a language of Latin origin but little circulation, the interwar critic adopted a strategy based sometimes on negation, other times on exaggeration. This strategy was to be reiterated in more rigid terms during the 1970s and 1980s, with the advance of cultural protochronism, supported by the Communist Party officials.

The acute conscience of writing the history of a literature that was both small (in terms of historical quantity) and minor (in terms of importance and recognized value) inspired Călinescu to organize the corpus in a way that mirrors the external distinction between Romanian literature and other major European literatures, particularly French, Italian, German, and Spanish. He makes extensive use of axiological taxonomies, to be proved for instance by some chapter titles: "Minor poets", "Great prose writers", "Small Romanticism", "Small/ Insignificant Theatre" ("mărunt"), and so on. The authors that were labelled as "great" are treated in single chapters, the others are grouped into categories that minimize (actually, correspond to) their importance and historical value: "Belated 'Classics'", "Eminescu's Epigones", "Other Trends", etc. Other minor categories, condemned to lack of interest if

BDD-A30720 © 2018 Editura Universității din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:52:53 UTC)

not thorough oblivion, refer to the practice of humanistic disciplines ("Translators"; "Philologists, Historians, Philosophers" – a symptom of literature's prominence in his value scale), to location ("Trans-Mountain Literature"), to genre ("Humorists"), etc.

Yet how does he define "minority" as a literary characteristic? In the chapter on „Minor Poets" the adjective is neither defined nor explained. Its meaning can be inferred from a series of critical remarks that point to the lack to talent, the ridiculous, the banality, the dominance of influences (either foreign or Romanian) that obstruct the original voice of the poet. When discussing the "small" variant of Romanticism (which Virgil Nemoianu will later define as "tamed" – Nemoianu 1984), the critic qualifies it as "provincial" and "rustic". These terms would theoretically imply features of literary mentality and are not necessarily value-laden. Yet they eventually reach such an effect.

In fiction, this kind of minor Romanticism prefers mediocre characters, with limited aspirations, lacking depth and greater significance. They provide the material of minor genres, as novella is in relation to the novel (the phrase "small novel" appears in analysis). In terms of authorship, such writers are virtuous, not brilliant, as high Romantics are. Literary technique becomes, in this case, more prominent than sheer vision.

There are also other literary categories minimized as irrelevant, such as the literature written in dialect, authored by women, or reflecting a professional ethos (the poetry of workers, sailors, office clerks, etc.). The term "minor" is vaguely described, yet (or because of this) it seems to have a very broad scope. Consequently literary margins are deemed as inferior and valuable only as echoes of major, aesthetic, high literature.

Somehow, minor literature gets an essentialist meaning; a writer, a literary form, or work do not become minor as a result of a subjective judgment, but are "born" this way. For all its merits, Călinescu's *History* does not feature a dynamic vision of literature that would allow for comebacks and revaluations.

This strong sense of hierarchy also pervades Nicolae Manolescu's *Istoria critică a literaturii rom*âne (2008), modelled after Călinescu's work. Besides the usual label "Marii scriitori" (Great writers) which has become a commonplace in Romanian literary historiography when applied to the four representative writers of Junimea literary society (Eminescu, Creangă, Caragiale, Slavici), there are chapters that discuss „Micul clasicism poetic" (Small Classicism in Poetry), „Avangardiști minori" (Minor Avantgarde Writers), minor literary forms. The latter are marginalized at the end of the *History;* they include literature for children and teenagers, the fantastic, science fiction, crime fiction. Except for fairy tales, children's literature fails to get the attention of literary criticism due to its „puținătate și precaritate"/scarcity and insignificance (Manolescu 2008: 1393). (The only writer able to raise it to a major level was the poet Tudor Arghezi.)

BDD-A30720 © 2018 Editura Universității din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:52:53 UTC)

Some writers are deemed as minor because they are situated „in between" established literary periods: for instance, Șt. O. Iosif's poetry occupies the middle ground between „small social Romanticism" and „the breeze of Symbolism" (Manolescu 2008: 513). Thus impurity emerges as a value criterion. Another criterion is provided by belatedness (of a literary generation): the writers of the 2000s are labelled „belated '80ists".

In the case of exile literature, marginal becomes minor: „The contribution of the diaspora is minimal, especially in the case of contemporary writers. The Bessarabians, many and uneven, are totally outdated with few exceptions, or out of phase (the majority of them). Their place in a history of Romanian literature cannot be precisely determined yet" (Manolescu 2008: 1401)[7].

Generally, the traditional comparatist view on literary influence is still preserved: whenever a writer displays the influence of a model, he/she is prone to being considered minor. This is the case of the contemporary essayist Horia-Roman Patapievici (among others) who is compared to Emil Cioran's tone and attitude in the book mentioned above. Over the volume, Nicolae Manolescu's selection of writers and axiological options are in line with Harold Bloom's theory of the literary canon (*The Western Canon,* 1994), strongly emphasizing a list of major figures and marginalizing „autorii de dicționar"/the authors for a dictionary.

A different perspective over minority and marginality is proposed by Horia-Roman Patapievici in his very controversial book *Omul recent*/ The Recent Man (2001). Taking stand with historical and philosophical arguments against the leveling of postmodern society and the mainstream view over political correctness, the author proposes a rethinking of minority from the angle of elite theory. A chapter in the book expresses an 'eulogy of marginality' ("Un elogiu al marginalității") and identifies the "true" marginal with a minoritary elite that opposes massification and the dictatorship of the commonplace. In this view, marginality stands for a repository of true intellectual spirit and old time values. Patapievici insists that his reading is not to be understood as similar to advocating for the rights of ethnic or other minorities (though recognizing their contribution to Romanian culture). "Marginality" represents difference in the creative and intellectual sense: "Any creative act starts with a claim to difference. At the beginning, the creator is a marginal. And *qua* marginal he is part of a minority. The integrating obsession with assimilation obliquely feeds itself on the craving to abolish difference which always repeals any creative impulse. Only those societies progressed that admitted that difference is not a heresy and dared to protect the right to difference at

[7] „Contribuția emigrației e minimă, mai ales dacă ne referim la contemporani. (...) Basarabenii, numeroși, inegali, sunt, cu puține excepții (...), depășiți cu totul (...) ori defazați (majoritatea). Locul lor într-o istorie a literaturii române nu se poate încă stabili cu precizie."

BDD-A30720 © 2018 Editura Universității din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:52:53 UTC)

odds with the principles of massified societies" (Patapievici 2001: 356)[8].

When extended to the scale of a nation (the Romanian one) who assert its right to cultural recognition, this analysis of marginality takes on activist nuances which it refuses to the postmodern ideology of multiculturalism. Aspiring (and being entitled, as it's suggested) to a prominent, closer to the centre status, the marginal culture is thus invested with the attributes of the major one(s). If it were only for this provocative association of elite marginality with major status, Patapievici's reflection on the conventionality of associations such as that between marginal and minor would still be provocative and refreshing.

Over more than a century, Romanian and international debates on the related topics of marginality and minority have circulated several criteria: the foreseeable geographic one, a quantitative one, and more importantly a political one. All of them acquired value-laden nuances. The side effect of thinking the status of a national culture in relation to its models was often the obliteration of the internal margins and complexities for the sake of a more imposing self- representation. As the Slovene theorist Marko Juvan explains, „Since the nineteenth century, the discourse of national literary histories has been rooted in the transnational ideology of European cultural nationalism (…) These self-enclosed and ethnocentric scholarly meta-descriptions of particular semiospheres were based on privileging a monolingual, canonic, and central tradition that historians had distilled from the historical and linguistic plurality of their cultural space (…)." (Juvan 2010: 55) And also: „by privileging comparisons with the great and being blind to other margins, the discipline [of literary history] strengthened the power of the metropolis and transferred its imperial perspective to the home environment" (Juvan 2010: 60).

A similar problematic effect triggered by the superposing of the above mentioned criteria is analysed by Jana Bukova in her paper *Not Small. Minor.* The othering of the less-known culture translates in the ambiguous quality of exoticism: „In small literatures, one inescapably recognises an exoticism of some kind. Their very designation refers you to distant or else not sufficiently familiar places" (Bukova 2015: 228).

It was precisely the focus on self-definition and ethnocentric identitary theorizing that hindered a larger circulation of cultural products outside a marginal nation's borders. Often vexed by the lack of interest of the cultural centres, the marginal and minor literary cultures such as the Romanian one were historically less mindful to their own practices of self-exclusion.

[8] „Orice act creator începe prin proclamarea diferenței. La origini, creatorul este marginal (…) Și, *qua* marginal, el este un minoritar. Obsesia integristă a asimilării se hrănește pieziș din setea de a suprima diferența, care anulează întotdeauna fermentul creator. Au progresat acele societăți care au admis că diferența nu este o erezie și care au îndrăznit, sfidând principiile societăților masificate, să protejeze dreptul la diferență."

BDD-A30720 © 2018 Editura Universității din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:52:53 UTC)

WORKS CITED:

BUKOVA, Jana, 2015, ''Not Small. Minor'', *Studi Slavistici*, January, pp. 227-235. Available at: <http://www.fupress.net/index.php/ss/article/view/15357>. Date accessed: 14 Dec. 2018;

FUNDOIANU, B., 1980, *Imagini și cărți / Images and books*, Ed. by Vasile Teodorescu, transl. by Sorin Mărculescu, introductory study by Mircea Martin, Bucharest, Minerva;

JUVAN, Marko, 2010, 'Peripherocentrisms: Geopolitics of Comparative Literatures between Ethnocentrism and Cosmopolitanism', in Jean Bessière & Judit Maár (ed.), *Histoire de la littérature et jeux d´échange entre centres et périphéries*. Paris, Harmattan, pp. 53–63;

MANOLESCU, Nicolae, 2008, *Istoria critică a literaturii rom*âne / *Critical History of Romanian Literature*, Pitești, Paralela 45 Publishing House;

MARTIN, Mircea, 2002, *G. Călinescu și „complexele" literaturii române / G. Călinescu and the „Complexes" of Romanian Literature*, 2nd ed., Pitești, Paralela 45 Publishing House;

NEMOIANU, Virgil, 1984, *The Taming of Romanticism,* Harvard University Press;

PATAPIEVICI, Horia-Roman, 2001, *Omul recent / The Recent Man*, Bucharest, Humanitas;

TIHANOV, Galin, 2014,''Do 'Minor Literatures' Still Exist? The Fortunes of a Concept in the Changing Frameworks of Literary History'', *Studia Imagologica*. 2014, Vol. 22, pp. 169-190.

BDD-A30720 © 2018 Editura Universității din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:52:53 UTC)