



## FROM VOLTAIRE TO CIORAN

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**Abstract:** *The history of French-Romanian cultural relations is tri-centenarian and biunivocal. It covers all levels of post-Illuminist intellectual preoccupation (literature, historiography, human and physical geography, arts, linguistics, fundamental scientific research, journalism, etc), without generating a vassalage relationship, as asserted by a common pre-conceived idea. "The small Paris" and the "Orient's Belgium" have also considerably influenced French culture, from Ronsard to Emil Cioran, and continue to do so. Diachronically, the most objective witness of this reciprocal infusing is the history of translations, which have considerably contributed to the crystallization of the modern Romanian language and literature, on the one hand, and to general social progress, on the other. A concrete and relevant example, therefore, of communication and communion.*

**Keywords:** *French-Romanian cultural relations, literature, communication, communion*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Although the Romanian language – with the corresponding dialects – is structurally very close to Iberic idioms (we are talking about the lateral area theory in linguistics geography), the historical relation that we have favoured, at least from the pre-modern period onwards, was the one with France. The French-Romanian cultural relations have been direct and intense for at least 300 years, *id est* since the Encyclopaedia times (in spite of the common preconceived idea, that places them mainly in the 19<sup>th</sup> century).

In Romanian historiography, still incompletely freed from victimising mechanisms such as the “bouc émissaire”, the period from 1711-1821 (the battle of Stănileşti to the Revolution of Tudor Vladimirescu) is known as the “Fanariot period”, which is regarded as diabolic because of corruption, exploitation, excessive taxation, and defiant luxury of the social elite etc. To a certain – pretty high – extent, this is how things really worked.

Nevertheless, it is not less true that the first massive infusions of French language and civilisation in Romanian territory took place

during the same period. The first performance of a play in Bucharest, in 1802, staged a French play, which was performed in French at the “Cişmeaua roşă” in Bucharest, under the patronage of Ralu Caragea, the daughter of the Fanariot ruler, whose name is rather remembered in connection with a plague epidemic. It is a well documented fact that the important Byzantine families that were sending rulers for Romanian provinces were impregnated with French culture, many of the future princes being born in Paris and having a French nurse.

Still, this does not imply a tender uniformity of some permanent cordial relations. On the contrary, as France had to play a difficult diplomatic-military card in Bosfor and Gurile Dunării and was obliged, given the historical antagonism, to act against English influence (as Germany did not count at sea). It has almost permanently developed an affable relation with the Sublime Porte. The French ambassador attended the martyrdom of Constantin Brancoveanu and his sons, as one attends a show at the Comédie Française, from which resulted a pretty well-written memorialist-cynical page. In 1812, as Napoleon Bonaparte had other priorities, he

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rejected the secret detachment of Moldavian boyars, and Bessarabia passes under the Ottoman rule. And the examples could go on.

But this is not the essential part.

### 2. FRENCH-ROMANIAN RELATIONSHIPS

On the other hand, the French-Romanian relations are biunivocal, which means permanent active communication between the Hexagon and the Romanian Kingdom, and not a unidirectional vassalage relation. At the dawn of the Renaissance, Pierre Ronsard claims to descend, even if only within a fabulous genealogy, from the Wallachian Ban Mărăcine (Fr. ronce = mărăcine). The Bibescu, Văcărescu, Rosetti, Cantacuzino, Brâncoveanu, Brătianu families leave deep traces in French culture. Having studied in Paris, the bonjouristes from the Provinces and the 1848 revolutionaries think ‘à la française’ and, obviously, express themselves as such; after all, “Chant de la Roumanie” is a piece of French, or at least francophone ‘avant la lettre’, literature.

The French influence is most substantially visible at the linguistic level. Neologic borrowings, the idea itself of neologism (with a prevalent role in the de-hellenisation of the Romanian modern language) originate in France.

The literary structures of the Romanian language mould onto the French matrix, given that 15-20% of the fundamental Romanian vocabulary is of French origin. Until late after the Second World War, French becomes here a language of **resistance**, of **expression** (it is not accidental that Romania is a full member of Francophonie) and of **transition** (the majority of the Romanians in occupied Bessarabia learn the Latin alphabet through the French language). The aesthetic categories, the literary toposes and the history of the modern Romanian literature itself, are infused by (and infuse in their turn) the *gaulois* spirit, from Michelet translating Miorița (*La Brebis*) to the last great French stylist, Cioran. A parallel list of literary-artistical French-Romanian personalities is easy and useful to draw, even

if not all of them are called Panait Istrati, Eliade, Enescu, Brâncuși, Traian Vuia, Coandă, Babeș or Ionesco. Not less relevant is the list of translators, absolutely impossible to exhaust. Starting with the Văcărescu brothers and Ion Heliade Rădulescu, continuing with Eminescu, Caragiale, Șt. O. Iosif, Duiliu Zamfirescu, Odobescu, Coșbuc or Sadoveanu, a massive amount of translating into and from French was done. Among the privileged authors, we mention Voltaire, Racine, Lamartine, Corneille, and Victor Hugo.

Here is an eloquent example, not really at random, regarding the spread and depth of these intercultural synapses: François Villon’s famous line “Mais où sont les neiges d’antan?” knows no less than 13 translation variants in the Romanian language, which I allow myself to render here be it only for the sheer euphonious pleasure:

1. “Dar zăpada celui an?” (Zoe Verbiceanu, 1940)
2. “Dar unde-s marile ninsori?” (Dan Botta, 1957)
3. “Dar unde sunt zăpezile de an?” (Lucian Blaga, 1957)
4. “Dar unde-i neaua de mai an?” (R. Vulpescu, 1958)
5. “Dar unde-i neaua de odinioară?” (Francisc Păcurariu, 1974)
6. “Dar unde sunt/ zăpezile de altădată?” (Neculai Chirică, 1975)
7. “Cea zăpadă/ De-astă iarnă unde-o fi?” (A. Alexianu, 1980)
8. “Ci unde-i neaua fostu-i an?” (Șt. Aug. Doinaș, 1988)
9. “Dar unde-i neaua din cel an?” (Dan Dănilă)
10. “Ci unde-i neaua de mai ieri?” (Șerban Foarță, 2003)
11. “Ci unde-i neaua iernii, azi?” (idem, var.)
12. “Ci unde-i neaua de mai an?” (idem, var.)
13. “Dar unde-s iernile de-atunci?” (Radu Cârneli, 2005)

And if it comes to enumerating: Jules Michelet, Paul Bataillard, Edgar Quinet, Ulysses de Marsillac, Ubicini, and C. Rosenthal – is a sample from the long list of

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personalities who, starting mainly with “the century of the 3 revolutions”, warmly welcomed Romanian students in Paris.

### 3. CONCLUSIONS

To conclude, the history of French-Romanian relations and reciprocal influences is tricentenary and biunivocal. The two national, linguistic and cultural entities are in a dynamic relation of communicating vessels. On the one hand, the francophonie of Romanians justifies the epithets of “small Paris” and “Orient's Belgium”, the modern Romanian language and literature being decisively imprinted by the French mark. At the same time, Romanian cultural and political personages play at least a constant, if not progressive, role in the intellectual paradigm of France. One happy, even providential

example, of intercultural communication and communion of ideals.

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