

*Considerations on Finnish and Romanian Literary and Cultural Relations
within the European Context*

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Abstract

Sharing similar historical development, fairly equally placed under the eastern bloc pressure, Romania and Finland became gradually involved in a process of mutual cultural reception. Two relatively exotic presences, with short literary traditions, the Romanian and Finnish cultures, inherently and abruptly divergent, have undergone important changes during the past century, specifically the period during which they managed to acknowledge each other the most. The present article focuses on key aspects of literary and cultural relations, historical constraints and topics related to diplomacy. The emphasis is set on Finland as seen from a Romanian perspective and the paper presents some highlights of the activity of Raoul Bossy, Romanian ambassador to Finland between the Worlds Wars.

1. Introduction and background

The purpose of the present article is, as mentioned in the title, to highlight some aspects related to cultural crossings between Finnish and Romanian literature. The endeavour was relatively challenging as Romanians and Finns have never had stable and constant interactions on a cultural plane throughout their short history.

A part of Scandinavia, from a cultural and geographical point of view, Finland does not have a clear image in Romania; it is often assimilated to the other northern countries. There confusions are not few, yet Finland represents for Romania a unique and, more importantly, respectable place. It is worth mentioning that there is no real reason for this surprising matter of fact; Romanians and Finns know very little of each other, yet Finland holds a serious advantage in terms of brand. For instance, it is not always clear for Romanians what the differences are between certain Scandinavian countries. Much in the same way as the distinction between the concepts „Romanian” and „Roma” is not clear for Finns.

Regarding the necessity of this research, it should be noted that there are no extended papers published on the topic of Finnish literature and culture reception in Romania. Articles and reviews have been published and volumes were dedicated more to the historic or diplomatic sector, but Finnish literature for instance, has only been approached in a fragmentary manner, never through a synthesis, despite the strengthening of cultural relations between the last two countries in the last period of time.

2. National image and values

2.1. Finnish values

Overshadowed by the Swedish umbrella on one side and by the Russian one on the other, Finnish language and culture managed, quite miraculously, to fall into place and, moreover, to become homogenous, affirmed, proactive. Finns are big readers, statistically the most numerous in the world; a surprising result considering where they started at. A very small population, spread on a wide, often barren land, with harsh winters but a valuable resource of wood from its infinite forests and a unique spirit, called ”sisu” – the Finn’s determination to never get discouraged and continue, undisturbed, with his well-calculated plan – have turned Finland into a genuine social curiosity. The truly crucial moment in Finland’s history has been obtaining its independence in 1917. This year marks the beginning of a century in which Finns have gone from being a small Nordic population to a true nation whose model should be noted. The fast development of science and technology, the promotion and maintaining of a neutral status, the affiliation to the Nordic countries group, the rapid transition to a 100% literacy rate, the openness towards the study of foreign languages, the social security system are only some of the progress factors, even if chosen at random, to what Finland is today. Although interested in Finnish civilization, Romanian society has learnt, unfortunately, nothing from it.

Finland fought fiercely for every square inch of land and, even though it was subject to Russia’s pressure, it probably was the biggest surprise of World War II, as it thwarted the initial plan of conquest and delayed the events with a few months. Even if eventually, it had to give up, Finland and the Winter War became real models of

conduct and uprightness. Romania, found in a similar situation at one point in time, had a completely different, much less heroic attitude. Later on, the decision to maintain neutral status and the rapid development of its society have raised even further Finland's international rank. Nowadays, the mere mention of its name is a synonym for a set of values promoted and recognized worldwide; this provides an additional reason for the drafting of this article.

2. 2. Is a comparison possible?

Romanian and Finnish cultures have had a rather irregular contact throughout time. As Romanians, when we look to the relations to other cultures, we are automatically tempted to deem our culture as somewhat inferior, propelled by a language unspoken elsewhere; in brief, a culture that loses any direct cultural confrontation. However, when it comes to Finland, we can state that chances are balanced, as Romania is, not infrequently, in a considerable advantage. At a closer look, we can see that more Finnish literature has been translated within the Romanian space. We seemed more interested in Finland than the other way around. Included in the Nordic, Scandinavian space, Finnish culture has been taken as part of the "package" along with the other ones: Danish, Norwegian and Swedish. Enjoying a good name like few other cultures do, with an unquestionable morality, imposing, from a social point of view, its *Nordic Model*, Finland was always interesting for Romanians, or at least for those interested enough to take a closer look. However, the reverse is not always true. Even though the Finns have left written testimonials about us early, especially in the form of travel journals, at a higher cultural level, Romania has published more substantial papers on Finland.

The factors that led to a syncopated mutual knowledge were mainly historical: late cultural emergence, late assertion of national identity and independence, the two world Wars, the Russian sphere of influence, the Iron Curtain, Romanian communism, and finally, the European Union and the problems brought forth by free passage.

3. Finnish literature as seen by Romanians

Finnish literature has in no way the size of other European literatures, for example. Several factors, historical and social ones, have kept this literature as a type of miniature. Starting with the rough conditions in which the Finnish population met its development, moving through the historical context which has not been kind, and ending with a tendency to interior life, to isolation, but not necessarily to reflection or introspection, Finnish literature has only become widely known in the twentieth century. A shy evolution marked, among others, by the character of the Finnish language, a cryptic, unpopular language, not spoken in other spaces. Three languages have been used in literature, throughout time: Latin, Swedish and Finnish, with an emphasis of the last two.

In terms of space, Finnish literature was mostly written in Finland. It knows no mobility or spatial extension. Officially, oral productions also have to be included here as a subcategory of folklore. Yet, an anthropological and geopolitical aspect should be noted here. Finland is a relatively large country, but with a small population. The population's placement in the southern area, friendlier in terms of climate, has caused communities in the central and northern areas to be at considerable distances

from one another, a fact which has determined a lack of communication, and the emergence of local dialects.

Finnish literature has had a special path, subject to many socio-political changes. Old literature is limited to a few folklore poems. Classic literature is not very present until the Age of Enlightenment; however, certain elites of the time focused upon the little existing literature and collected it, providing today with a relatively accurate inventory of the beginnings of Finnish literature.

Bibliographically, Finland's literary history is only represented to a small degree. Naturally, there are literary histories in Finnish, published especially in the second half of the twentieth century. Some of them have been translated into English or into other widely spoken languages. One work of reference in the field, written in Finnish is *Suomen kirjallisuuden historia* (1981). For the English language, Jaakko Ahokas (1973) has to be mentioned here. His work, *A History of Finnish Literature*, is one of the main pillars to support Finnish literary history. In Romanian, somewhat predictably, these sources are rare. Articles, reviews and fiction translations have been published, but in terms of literary history, the Romanian space is flawed.

One of the most authorized sources, in terms of representing Finnish literature in Romania, or vice versa, is a volume published in 2005 under the title *Confluente româno-finlandeze. Trei secole de contacte, 85 de ani de relații diplomatice*¹ (*Romanian-Finnish confluences. Three centuries of contacts, 85 years of diplomatic relations*), which offers a thorough, chronological inventory of historical and cultural facts. Basically, there were no consistent volumes dedicated to Finland in Romanian, except for some memoirs or travel journals and the magazine "Secolul 20" (The 20th Century) which dedicated an entire issue to Finland in 1982. But there were major works by Finnish authors translated into Romanian. There is, however, a fairly rich publishing activity. The Romanian source with the highest number of occurrences about Finnish literature, culture and history is, by far, the magazine „Columna”², animated and brought to a level of reference point by the Romanian Language Lecturers from the University of Turku in the 80s, 90s and 2000s. This type of sustained effort made it possible to gather a great number of articles on various topics. The magazine became the host for writings about the Romanian culture as it is seen by certain thinkers, teachers and Finnish scholars in general.

4. Culture and diplomacy

Cultural and diplomatic relations between Romania and Finland have not been numerous throughout time; however, due to the obvious geopolitical similarities, they had the same reference grid to the spheres of influence of the Second World War, for example. Two “exotic” peoples, as they seem to one another, Romania and Finland started a shy and fragmented process of mutual knowledge at various moments in history. Raoul Bossy is, undoubtedly, the one who facilitated the contact between the

¹ *Confluente româno-finlandeze. Trei secole de contacte, 85 de ani de relații diplomatice, Romanialais-Suomalaisia yhtymäkohtia. 300 vuotta kosketuksia, 85 vuotta diplomaattisuhteita. Romanian-Finnish confluences. Three centuries of connections, 85 years of diplomatic relationships.* Alexandru Popescu, realizarea textelor, Editura Institutului Cultural Român, București, 2005.

² Published by the Romanian Lectureship at the School of Languages and Translation Studies, Faculty of Humanities, University of Turku, Finland.

two cultures, through active action in the period between the wars. In actuality, the names of certain diplomats, such as Alexandru Popescu or Neagu Udroiou or those of scholars such as Silviu Miloiu, have updated the map of Romanian-Finnish interaction, through published articles and volumes. In the following paragraphs I will present some reference points from Raoul Bossy's activity as a cultural mediator.

4.1. Who is Raoul Bossy?

Romanian Ambassador Raoul Bossy, only spent two years in Finland, in the interwar period (1934-1936). His activity was not confined to diplomatic contacts and implicitly, to strengthening political and strategic relations between Romania and Finland. Raoul Bossy carried out an intense cultural activity, made Romanian culture known in the far north through effective cultural measures, by encouraging the exchange of ideas, organizing a big, extraordinary Romanian culture exhibit in Helsinki and by gathering the scattered Finnish writings about Romania in a volume to which he added valuable comments.

4.2. Finnish Testimonials

Mărturii finlandeze și alte scrieri nordice despre români (Finnish Testimonials and Other Nordic Writings about Romanians) comprises Raoul V. Bossy's notes; Raoul Bossy is a Romanian diplomat who contributed significantly to strengthen the relation between Romania and Finland. His appointment as a member of the Coordination Council within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs comes with the task of coordinating diplomacy offices in Stockholm, Helsinki and Berlin. His diplomatic mission brings him in connection to the Nordic countries, as he was named Minister Plenipotentiary and Envoy Extraordinary of Finland, on 1 February 1934. Silviu Miloiu, author of the *Preface* for this volume and the most important contemporary researcher on Finnish-Romanian issues states that „Raoul Bossy's activity as head of the Romanian Legation in Helsinki has contributed to a remarkable progress of Romanian-Finnish relations in terms of cultural exchanges, political cooperation and even, to some degree, trade relations” (Bossy, 2008, p. 9). At the end of 1936, the Finnish government decides to abolish visas for passports of Romanian diplomats.

Throughout his diplomatic mission, Bossy took part in several cultural events in Finland, such as the centenary of *Kalevala* or the Romanian exhibit in Helsinki which comprised objects from traditional and modern art, concerts of Romanian classical music and the launch of two works about Romania written by Väiniö Tanner (1935) și V. J. Mansikka (1935). The Romanian diplomat has always tried to tactfully manage and promote Romanian interests in Finland and enjoyed the appreciation of Finnish political elites, as he was decorated with the „Order of the White Rose of Finland” by the Finnish President himself. Bossy was noticed by various Finnish publications which made him known to the Finns, through various interviews.

The paper *Mărturii finlandeze și alte scrieri nordice despre români (Finnish Testimonials and Other Nordic Writings about the Romanians)* brings forth the notes of Finnish travellers about Romania, but also about the interactions between the two peoples, which had been unknown until that time. In the *Preface* of this work, Raoul Bossy states that he had the opportunity to find testimonials of Finns who had visited the Principalities, testimonials dating back from the XVIIIth century. The majority belong to the Russian armed forces that had travelled the Principalities. In that time, the Finns were part of the Tsarist Empire and took part at the military operations

undertaken by the Empire. In closing, he gives thanks to the national Archives of Finland and to the Helsinki Library, which have contributed to the volume with the manuscripts made available to him.

Raoul Bossy's research revealed the existence of 36 Finnish officers who were part of the Russian army and who fought against Turkey between 1828 and 1829. Three of them, col. Gustav-Adolf Ramsay, col. Frederik G. Nyberg and cpt. Berndt Johan Rosenström have described their experience in the Principalities, the people and the places here, in the form of journals or written memoirs in correspondence. Their impressions about Moldavia and Dobrogea were generally positive, although they sometimes condemned the dirty markets and suburbs, the primitive inns and the narrow, intricate streets. The Finns who were part of the Russian troupes against Turkey between 1877 and 1878 were a lot more numerous than those from the previous war. They described the people and places they went to and impressions from the battlefield or military strategies of the two armies (Bossy, 2008, pp. 5-159).

4.3. Tales from the diplomatic life

In 1999 Humanitas published *Amintiri din viața diplomatică (1918-1940) (Tales from the Diplomatic Life)* - a memoir in two volumes written by Raoul Bossy, where he presented, in retrospect, key moments of his diplomatic career. The Helsinki „episode” from the period 1934-1936 is presented here. Bossy confesses how, even before leaving Bucharest, he was encouraged by N. Titulescu to find the appropriate formula for closing an agreement with Finland „a pact of friendship, conciliation and arbitration, while avoiding as much as possible the awakening of Russia's suspicion” (Bossy, 1999, p. 236).

Once he reached his destination, Bossy was somewhat surprised to see that he was received with great kindness and he concludes that Rafael Hakkarainen, Chief of Protocol at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs „appears flattered that, after so many years, Romania would settle a diplomatic mission in Helsingfors (...). My presence (...) is thus interpreted as evidence to the rising prestige that the young Finnish state enjoys” (Bossy, 1999, p. 237). Raoul Bossy, owing to contacts with other diplomacy members, representatives of other countries on Finnish land, acknowledges Finland's delicate situation of the time. Through formal and less formal contacts, he manages to draft Finland's sketch, as it was seen from the outside, but also from the inside.

In the fall of 1934, Finland would celebrate the centenary of its great writer Aleksis Kivi. Raoul Bossy participates with an address; in addition to this, „I had made sure to publish one of my articles on Kivi in *Convorbiri literare*, to show that the Finnish writer is well known in our country” (Bossy, 1999, p. 244). Another anniversary, one year later, in 1935, was the centenary for the launch of *Kalevala*, when Bossy discovered that „Convorbiri literare” published some fragments from it in Romanian translation some decades before.

Raoul Bossy's memoir volume is a valuable source for understanding the way in which the Romanian space was regarded in the interwar period. The Romanian diplomat would have the chance to meet different local personalities which introduced him to the Finnish patriarchal lifestyle, especially through trips in the nature, to mansions that reminded the author of the aristocrat ones back home. Moreover, many of these are familiar with the Romanian universe: „Several Finnish

aristocracy families had ancestors who had spent months - or years - in Romania, as officers of the Imperial Russian Army during the Russian occupation, especially in 1828. I was provided access to family archives, letters³ they sent home from Bucharest, describing the situation there” (Bossy, 1999, p. 248). On 28 November 1936, Raoul Bossy would leave Helsinki permanently.

4.4. Expeditions in Lapland and Scandinavia

On 17 July 1934, Raoul Bossy leaves for the far Finnish north, passing thousands of kilometres and discovering the unique regions of Lapland. After travelling by train, car, ship, after visiting Rovaniemi, Inari, Ivalo, Bossy arrives at the Arctic Ocean, in the isolated lands of the frozen north: „No Romanian has set foot here since the beginning of time, and it is hard to believe that another will for a long time! In fact, few people must have walked these wild places since prehistoric times to our day” (Bossy, 1999, pp. 252-253). Bossy visits an impressive number of places and describes nature and Lapland tribes. He crosses over to the neighbouring country and admires the impressive Norwegian coasts. Raoul Bossy takes other trips in the Scandinavian countries, and visits Stockholm, Uppsala, Copenhagen, but also Karelia, Tallinn and Russia; yet these visits are unfortunately described only briefly.

5. Conclusions and further research

Finnish culture through Romanian eyes remains a topic worthy of further investigation, despite all studies published so far, including the present paper. Even more so as the dynamics of Romanians’ perception of Finland appears to have changed significantly in the last years. Reunited under the same sky by the constitution of the European Union, Romania and Finland are closer than ever but, at the same time, the first major frictions have emerged. The last years show a sceptic Finland with regard to Romania’s chances of achieving the status of Schengen country, a fact which cannot pass unnoticed. Moreover, the problems caused by certain Romanian citizens on Finnish territory have created even more obstacles in the development of a real, reliable collaboration. On the other hand, some actions undertaken by major Finnish companies have created significant stress in this area. As such, in 2011, the airline Finnair cancelled all flights from Helsinki to Bucharest and Nokia withdrew from Cluj-Napoca; both events took place the same week and left big question marks behind along with a general state of distress in the Romanian society. On a more optimistic note, the fact that the field with the most numerous Finnish-Romanian collaborations is art, should be highlighted. Several promotional activities have taken place in the last decade: art exhibitions, film festivals, round tables.

References

³ ”I have published a large number of these joyful, interesting documents regarding the past of the Principalities in a volume printed in 1937, by the I.C. Brătianu Foundation, with the title *Mărturii finlandeze despre România (Finnish Testimonials about Romania)*” (Bossy, 1999, pp. 248-249).

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