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Doctoral School of Linguistic and Literary Studies

DOCTORAL THESIS

**The Exportability of Romanian Prose in Anglophone Translation in the
Twentieth and Twenty-first Centuries**

Summary

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The Exportability of Romanian Prose in Anglophone Translation in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries

Abstract

This dissertation examines the mechanisms governing the international circulation of Romanian literature through comparative case studies spanning from mid-twentieth century exiles to contemporary authors. Using world-systems theory, literary sociology, and reception studies, it analyzes how Romanian prose achieves, partially achieves or does not achieve visibility in Anglophone markets. The research reveals that exportability emerges not from aesthetic merit alone, but from the convergence of linguistic leverage, institutional mediation, thematic alignment, and historical timing. Through an analysis of the reception of Mircea Eliade, Emil Cioran, Herta Müller, Max Blecher, Mircea Cărtărescu, and Gabriela Adameșteanu, the study demonstrates that Romanian literature occupies a persistently semi-peripheral position within the global literary system, achieving international recognition only when specific structural conditions temporarily align.

1. Research Problem and Theoretical Framework

The central research question investigates to what extent and through what mechanisms Romanian literature has achieved visibility in the Anglophone sphere, and how these processes can be understood using world-systems theory and contextually appropriate analytical frameworks. This inquiry emerges from a fundamental dilemma in world literature studies: why do some authors from minor languages achieve international recognition while others of comparable artistic merit remain invisible?

Romanian literature presents a particularly instructive case study for understanding these dynamics. As a language spoken by approximately 27 million people, Romanian, though not negligible in size and scope, has not benefited from the historical conditions that enabled the global spread of other European languages (including colonial expansion, sustained geopolitical dominance, and institutional internationalization). As a result, within such a model as Immanuel Wallerstein's tripartite model of core, semi-periphery, and periphery, Romania has historically oscillated between semi-peripheral integration and peripheral dependency, maintaining significant

cultural production while remaining structurally dependent on core cultural centers for global validation.

Our theoretical framework draws primarily from world-systems theory (Wallerstein), Pascale Casanova's model of the "world republic of letters" (demonstrating how literary value is constructed through processes of consecration controlled by dominant cultural centers), Franco Moretti's work on uneven literary development (revealing how literary forms circulate asymmetrically from core to periphery), and Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of field, habitus, and symbolic capital (illuminating the social processes through which aesthetic objects acquire meaning and legitimacy). Furthermore, this framework addresses a limitation in sociological approaches to literary circulation by connecting macrostructures of literary distribution with the cultural and historical particularities that shape reception. We add to this Lawrence Venuti's analysis of translation politics, which exposes the domesticating pressures that foreign texts encounter in target cultures, although this dissertation extends Venuti's framework by demonstrating that domestication operates not only at the linguistic level but across multiple dimensions of cultural mediation.

The study introduces the concept of "exportability" as a historically contingent effect produced at the intersection of aesthetic force, cultural translatability, institutional support, and market appetite. In contrast to the approaches that treat international visibility as either a function of universal genius, random chance, or a staunchly political consequence, this analysis positions exportability as a relational and structurally determined phenomenon.

2. Literature Review and Research Gaps

My study builds on existing scholarship on Romanian literature's international circulation: principally, Sean Cotter's *Literary Translation and the Idea of a Minor Romania* (2018), which provides important insights into translation discourse in the Romanian case, while *Romanian Literature as World Literature* (2018), edited by Martin, Moraru, and Terian, offers a comprehensive interpretive world-systems analysis. Catapulted from the foundations of these two texts, my dissertation further builds on not only the systemic, but also sociological mechanisms that determine which Romanian authors achieve sustained international visibility.

The vaster field of world literature studies has rightfully identified the uneven distribution of literary prestige, with David Damrosch defining world literature as a *mode* of circulation and reception (rather than primarily a fixed corpus), whereby works gain new meanings as they enter different linguistic and cultural contexts, and Emily Apter cautioning against the uncritical

celebration of circulation by emphasizing the limits of translation and the persistence of untranslatability. However, this scholarship has not sufficiently examined the specific case of semi-peripheral literatures like Romanian, which occupy an intermediate position between marginality and recognition.

Translation studies, meanwhile, has explored how texts travel across cultures but has paid insufficient attention to the role of institutional infrastructures in determining which texts are selected for translation and how they are subsequently positioned within receiving cultures. This dissertation seeks to address these gaps by providing *empirical* analysis of how Romanian literature circulates within anglophone markets and what this circulation reveals about the structural dynamics of world literature.

3. Methodology

The study employs a hybrid methodological approach operating across three analytical levels: 1. structural-theoretical analysis grounded in world-systems theory and literary sociology; 2. institutional-contextual mapping of translation and publication flows; and 3. close textual reading situated within broader structural interpretation.

The research follows a comparative, historically informed case-study method, tracing the international trajectories of six Romanian authors across different periods and literary circuits. Each case study follows a consistent analytical protocol: contextualization within Romanian and European literary fields; mapping of translation patterns, publishers, prizes, and review venues; discourse analysis of rhetorical strategies; and correlation with theoretical concepts like semi-peripheral mediation and habitus.

The selection of authors is strategically comparative, designed to illuminate varied modes of exportability, consecration, delay, and structural blockage. The corpus includes: authors with high international visibility (Herta Müller, Mircea Cărtărescu); canonized domestic authors occupying liminal international positions (Max Blecher, Gabriela Adameşteanu); and historically successful figures whose visibility has subsequently receded (Mircea Eliade, Emil Cioran).

Data sources include anglophone reviews and critical discourse; translation histories and publishing trajectories; prize nominations and institutional recognition; digital reception through platforms like Goodreads and social media; and interviews and paratextual materials. The study combines qualitative analysis with quantitative indicators where available, anchoring theoretical claims in empirical observation.

4. Key Findings

4.1 The Mechanisms of Exportability

The research identifies five primary mechanisms through which Romanian literature achieves international visibility:

Linguistic Leverage: We find that authorial access to semi-core languages (French, German) dramatically accelerates circulation compared to Romanian-only publication. Mircea Eliade and Emil Cioran achieved global recognition by writing in French, while Herta Müller's German-language publication positioned her within established translation infrastructures. Authors writing exclusively in Romanian (Cărtărescu, Blecher, Adameşteanu) face significantly greater structural barriers.

Institutional Infrastructure: Translation, while essential, is insufficient. Sustained visibility requires reinforcement through major reviews, prize circuits, academic syllabi, and critical attention. Mircea Eliade's complete integration into the University of Chicago religious studies curriculum embedded his vocabulary within academic discourse for decades. In direct contrast, Max Blecher's multiple translations failed to consolidate into recognition due to absent advocacy networks.

Thematic Alignment: Works achieve visibility when their themes synchronize with interpretive frameworks dominant in receiving cultures at specific historical moments—for instance, the postwar existential climate enabled Eliade's sacred/profane phenomenology and Cioran's aestheticized despair, while post-1989 memory politics facilitated Müller's dictatorship testimony.

Formal Legibility: The anglophone market rewards aesthetic condensation—works that concentrate meaning into emblematic scenes or clear conceptual premises. Cioran's aphorisms proved highly exportable due to their extractability, while Cărtărescu's architectural maximalism signals “world literature” through monumental scale. Adameşteanu's distributed realism, meanwhile, requires more sustained mediation.

Biographical Narratability: Authors whose life stories offer dramatic arcs (Blecher's illness, or the French exiles' metamorphoses from fascists to sages) generate mythological resonance that propels circulation, as biographical elements become paratextual resources for positioning works within recognizable narratives.

4.2 Patterns of Semi-Peripheral Circulation

Notwithstanding the movability of the term itself, we find that Romanian literature consistently exhibits semi-peripheral characteristics: partial integration without full centrality, dependence on external validation, and oscillation between visibility and marginality. This manifests in several recurring patterns:

Mediated Visibility: Romanian authors often achieve recognition through intermediary cultural capitals (particularly Paris and Berlin) rather than direct access to anglophone markets. The "Romanian → French → English" pathway that sustained mid-century exiles (given Romanian culture's longstanding tradition of integration into French and France) has largely dissolved, leaving contemporary authors more dependent on direct translation.

Temporal Asynchrony: Romanian literary production often operates out of sync with dominant trends in central markets. Blecher's modernist innovations preceded global receptivity to illness narratives, while Adameșteanu's social realism emerged when anglophone markets favored more spectacularized forms of political testimony.

Comparative Containment: Anglophone reception consistently frames Romanian authors through analogical comparison to already-canonized Western figures ("the Romanian Kafka", "Eastern European Borges"), facilitating entry but risking reduction of originality.

4.3 The Limits of Consecration

The study reveals that international recognition remains temporally unstable and structurally constrained. Eliade and Cioran's mid-century consecration was followed by critical reassessment that diminished their authority, demonstrating that exportability is historically contingent rather than permanently achieved. Contemporary figures like Cărtărescu experience "suspended consecration"—accumulating prizes and Nobel speculation without (yet) achieving definitive anglophone integration.

Even successful examples reveal their own persistent asymmetries. Herta Müller's Nobel Prize, while almost entirely representing Romanian themes, technically entered German literary history due to her linguistic positioning. This paradox illustrates how the global literary system manages peripheral recognition through central mediation.

5. Case Study Contributions

Mircea Eliade and Emil Cioran: The French Mediation Model

An analysis of the two mid-century exiles establishes the classical semi-peripheral route to literary centrality through linguistic self-translation and institutional embedding. Their trajectory demonstrates both the possibilities and temporal limits of universalist positioning, as international postwar receptivity to their metaphysical frameworks later gave way to more situated critical approaches.

Herta Müller: Linguistic Hierarchy and National Ambiguity

Müller's 2009 Nobel Award in Literature reveals how access to semi-core languages circumvents peripheral constraints while complicating national categorization (a contemporary equivalent of the outdated contexts of Eliade and Cioran). Her trajectory elucidates the structural advantages of German-language publication and the role of Nobel recognition in redistributing symbolic capital, while exposing the reductive framing often imposed on authors from minor contexts.

Max Blecher: Translation Without Consolidation

Blecher's unusual situation—three English translations within eight years yet persistent marginality—demonstrates that circulation requires institutional advocacy beyond translation. His case reveals the limits of aesthetic excellence alone and the infrastructural dependencies that constrain peripheral modernism.

Mircea Cărtărescu: Suspended Consecration

As Romania's most translated contemporary author and a perennial Nobel candidate who has stirred debate in the Romanian literary scene and media alike, raising questions of peripheral validation in the contemporary context on the whole, Mircea Cărtărescu embodies the condition of delayed recognition characteristic of semi-peripheral circulation. His trajectory reveals asymmetries between continental European recognition and anglophone market penetration, while his self-positioning as "world author" illustrates strategies for negotiating national inscription versus universal aspiration.

Adameşteanu's limited anglophone visibility despite strong German reception tests whether exportability favors condensed over distributed narrative forms, shedding light on certain particularities of the Anglophone literary market in particular. Adameşteanu's social realism, built around memory and historical accumulation, reveals biases in literary markets toward spectacular rather than gradual meaning-making.

6. Theoretical Contributions

6.1 Exportability as Analytical Framework

The study develops "exportability" as an alternative to essentialist notions of literary universality, assuming international circulation to be a structurally determined process requiring specific alignments of form, infrastructure, and historical timing. This framework proves applicable beyond Romanian literature to other minor-language systems and is recommended as such.

6.2 Semi-Peripheral Literary Dynamics

The research results position semi-periphery as a distinct structural position characterized by productive cultural capacity confronted with limited autonomous circulation. Semi-peripheral literatures generate ambitious aesthetic innovation while remaining dependent on core validation, as national representation collides with universal aspiration.

6.3 Temporal Contingency of Consecration

Analysis reveals that literary consecration operates according to historically specific configurations of critical disposition and institutional priority. What enables recognition in one period may become liability in another, as illustrated by the change in optics of Eliade and Cioran.

7. Implications and Significance

7.1 For World Literature Studies

The research challenges assumptions about the natural diffusion of aesthetic excellence, demonstrating that international literary visibility depends on structural mediation and not only inherent textual qualities. This has implications for how world literature is conceived and institutionally supported in equal measure.

7.2 For Translation Policy

Findings suggest that translation funding necessarily requires coordination with institutional advocacy to achieve sustained impact. We have discovered that independent translations, however excellent, cannot overcome structural asymmetries without supporting critical infrastructure.

7.3 For Cultural Diplomacy

The study reveals the limited effectiveness of episodic cultural promotion compared to sustained institutional investment. Romanian literature's international fortunes depend less on spectacular showcasing than on patient cultivation of translation networks, critical discourse, and educational integration.

8. Limitations and Future Research

The study acknowledges several of its own limitations. Firstly, its focus on anglophone reception may not fully represent global circulation patterns. Secondly, the selection of prose works excludes poetry and drama, which operate through different infrastructures. Thirdly, temporal constraints limit analysis of very recent developments.

Future research directions include: comparative analysis with other semi-peripheral literatures (Hungarian, Czech, Bulgarian) to test the broader applicability of findings; quantitative mapping of translation flows and citation patterns; investigation of digital platforms' role in bypassing traditional gatekeeping mechanisms; and examination of gender dynamics in literary exportability.

9. Conclusions

9.1 The Persistence of Asymmetry

This dissertation posits that Romanian literature's international fortunes reveal fundamental and structural inequalities within the global literary system, starting from the Anglophone market. Despite a century of significant literary production and repeated attempts at international promotion, Romanian authors achieve sustained anglophone visibility only when multiple factors—linguistic positioning, institutional support, thematic relevance, and historical timing—temporarily converge, a phenomenon which can be mistaken for a happy twist of fate at first glance.

The research confirms that the world literary system operates not as an egalitarian republic but as a hierarchical pyramid where core languages and institutions maintain decisive advantages in determining which voices achieve global recognition. Romanian literature's semi-peripheral position generates a condition of productive marginality: sufficient cultural capital to create internationally significant works, yet insufficient structural power to ensure their autonomous circulation.

9.2 Export Packaging and Cultural Translation

The study reveals that international circulation involves not merely linguistic translation but comprehensive cultural repackaging. Romanian authors entering anglophone markets undergo processes of biographical mythologization, comparative positioning, and thematic alignment that often obscure the specific cultural contexts that generated their work. This “export packaging” functions as both enabling mechanism and constraining force, facilitating recognition while often diminishing subtlety or exactitude.

The analysis of paratextual materials—reviews, publisher descriptions, prize discourse—demonstrates how receiving cultures actively construct the meaning and significance of foreign authors rather than instantaneously recognizing inherent value. This cultural translation process reveals the active role of intermediary agents (translators, editors, critics) in determining not only which works circulate but the manner in which they are interpreted.

9.3 The Temporality of Recognition

Perhaps the most significant finding concerns the temporal instability of literary consecration. Authors like Eliade and Cioran, who achieved remarkable recognition, subsequently experienced critical reassessment that diminished their authority. This pattern suggests that exportability depends

on historically specific alignments of cultural disposition and interpretive framework rather than timeless and seamlessly adaptable aesthetic value.

Contemporary authors like Cărtărescu and Adameșteanu reveal different temporal dynamics: delayed or conditional recognition that depends on evolving critical priorities and institutional capacities. Cărtărescu's "suspended consecration" (the result of continuous Nobel speculation without definitive recognition) illustrates how semi-peripheral authors may hover indefinitely between marginality and centrality, while breakthroughs remain in a state of suspended anticipation.

9.4 Implications for Literary Studies

These findings challenge several assumptions common in literary scholarship:

The Autonomy of Aesthetic Value: The research demonstrates that literary quality, while necessary, is insufficient for international recognition. Works achieve global circulation through a negotiated process of structural positioning rather than inherent excellence, requiring scholars to examine the institutional and economic conditions that govern literary visibility.

The "Universality" of World Literature: The research inherently questions the blanket moniker of "universal", suggesting rather that world literature emerges as a curated selection of works that have successfully navigated specific systems of cultural validation. This process of curation systematically favors certain formal approaches, thematic orientations, and cultural positions while marginalizing others.

The Neutrality of Translation: Translation appears not as transparent linguistic transfer but as active cultural mediation involving the agency of the translation in selection, interpretation, and repositioning, but nevertheless themselves influenced by infrastructural realities. The decisions about which works to translate, how to frame them, and where to publish them fundamentally shape their reception and meaning.

9.5 Methodological Contributions

The study demonstrates the value of combining world-systems analysis with detailed reception studies and textual analysis. This multi-scalar tactic enables the scrutiny of both structural constraints and their specific cultural manifestations, revealing how global configurations of inequality materialize in particular institutional contexts and interpretive practices.

The concept of “exportability” developed here provides a framework for analyzing literary circulation that hopes to avoid both romantic notions of universal recognition and cynical reduction of literature to market commodities. By proposing that exportability is a relational and historically contingent phenomenon, the framework enables more precise analysis of why certain works travel while others remain localized.

9.6 Broader Cultural Implications

Beyond literary studies, this research illuminates dynamics of cultural power and recognition that extend across artistic and intellectual fields. The mechanisms governing Romanian literature’s circulation—linguistic hierarchy, institutional gatekeeping, comparative framing—operate in similar manners in other domains of cultural production, from academic scholarship to visual arts to popular culture.

The study suggests that efforts to promote cultural diversity and international understanding must address structural rather than merely aesthetic factors. Creating more equitable forms of cultural circulation requires investment in translation infrastructure and critical discourse, as well as educational integration on the longer term, rather than episodic promotional campaigns.

9.7 Romanian Literature’s Future Prospects

The research suggests several possible trajectories for Romanian literature’s continued international development:

1. Digital Disruption: Online platforms may bypass traditional gatekeeping mechanisms, enabling more direct circulation between authors and international readers, although the study suggests that digital circulation still requires institutional amplification to achieve sustained recognition.
2. European Integration: Romania’s increasing European development and relevance may facilitate circulation through European literary networks and funding mechanisms, potentially providing alternatives to anglophone-centered recognition, or a means of indirect bypassing into the core through the semi-core, as we have seen in individual cases.
3. Generational Renewal: Younger Romanian authors writing with explicit international orientation may develop strategies better adapted to contemporary global literary markets, though they face the significant challenge of maintaining cultural distinctiveness and avoiding an exaggeration of mimetism while achieving international legibility.

9.8 Final Reflections

If this dissertation commenced with the observation that Romanian literature, despite its rich modern tradition, remains persistently underrepresented in international literary discourse, then the research reveals that this underrepresentation reflects not aesthetic inadequacy but structural positioning within an unequal global system.

The persistence of these inequalities, even after decades of increased cultural globalization and institutional efforts at promoting literary diversity, suggests that they are not merely historical legacies but actively reproduced features of contemporary cultural production. Addressing them requires a realistic understanding of the precise mechanisms through which literary value is constructed and circulated, rather than assuming that quality will naturally find its audience.

Therefore, the incursion into the exportability of Romanian literature thus serves as both particular cultural history and general illustration of how it is that cultural power operates in an interconnected but unequal world. The authors examined here represent not merely individual careers, but, for our purposes, strategic responses to structural constraints that continue to shape cultural circulation in the twenty-first century. The export canon does not simply reproduce the domestic canon. Instead, it creates an alternative map of Romanian literature, shaped by the demands of foreign readability. Some authors become visible because their work corresponds to dominant narratives of exile, trauma, authoritarianism, or aesthetic exceptionality; others remain marginal because their forms, themes, or mediating infrastructures do not align with the expectations of the Anglophone literary field. The broader implication is that any serious account of world literature must attend not only to what circulates, but to the conditions under which circulation becomes meaningful. Literature from semi-peripheral cultures enters the global field through negotiation and reframing. Its success depends not simply on being written, or even translated, but on being made legible within systems of power that preexist it. Thus, exportability should be understood as a relational phenomenon: unstable, mediated, historically contingent, and structurally unequal.

Using Romanian literature as a paradigmatic case, this study develops a framework for understanding "exportability"—not as an intrinsic property of literary texts, but as a historically contingent effect produced by the intersection of linguistic positioning, institutional mediation, and temporal alignment with core cultural appetites. The central conclusion of this dissertation is that any semi-peripheral literature's visibility cannot be explained by aesthetic value alone. True internationalization of literary culture requires not just abundant translation of texts but an eventual

increased implication of the autochthonous institutional structures that determine which voices are heard on the world stage. Until such transformation occurs, literatures like Romanian will continue to experience the condition this study has analyzed: productive creativity coupled with structural marginality, aesthetic achievement shadowed by institutional invisibility, and the persistent gap between local recognition and global circulation that defines the semi-peripheral condition in world literature.

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