

## EFFACED NATIONAL IDENTITIES IN THE GLOBALIZED WORLD: DOUGLAS COUPLAND AS PART OF THE INTERCULTURAL (LITERARY) DIALOGUE BETWEEN ROMANIA AND CANADA

**Ana-Magdalena Petraru, PhD, "Al. Ioan Cuza" University of Iași**

*Abstract: The aim of this paper is to tackle generation X's effaced national identities throughout Douglas Coupland's work as seen by international and Romanian criticism. Thus, our research will account for Coupland's work as received in post-communist Romania and the place of the English Canadian novelist in the target culture. This will occur in the larger context of Canadian's literature position within the Romanian cultural and literary polysystem after almost one hundred years of intercultural (literary) dialogue between Romania and Canada.*

*Keywords: Canadian literature, Romanian reception, Romanian periodicals, generation X, effaced national identities*

### **An overview of the intercultural (literary) dialogue between Romania and Canada**

Romania and Canada have almost reached a hundred years of intercultural dialogue which started in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when some Canadian poems were published in Romanian periodicals. This is the case of W. H. Drummond's poems which came out in *Convorbiri literare/ Literary Talks* in 1915 and Nicolae Iorga's translations of Canadian verse from "Standard", Montreal published by the periodical *Drum Drept/ The Right Path* as poems by unknown poets in 1918 and 1919, both recorded by Lupu and Ștefănescu's *Bibliography of Romanian Literature and Its Relations with Foreign Literatures in Periodicals* (1997: 207). Further on, fragments of short stories from Stephen Leacock, Canada's greatest humorist of the era, hailed as its Mark Twain, came out in the early 1920s (in periodicals such as *Adevărul literar și artistic/ The Literary and Artistic Truth*, *Preocupări literare/ Literary Concerns*, *Orizontul/ The Horizon*, *Gazeta de duminică/ The Sunday Gazette*) and from Mazo de la Roche's novels. The latter wrote popular romance for women and it is actually the first Canadian author who enjoyed book-length treatment in the early stages of the Romanian-Canadian intercultural (literary) dialogue since she had her first novels of the *Jalna* series translated by the controversial Jul Giurgea in the 1930s and 1940s.

During the communist period, the intercultural relations between the two countries strengthen, at least as far as the literary dimension is concerned: the number of translations is higher than in the pre-communist years ranging from progressive fiction that served the interests of the totalitarian regime (e.g. Dyson Carter's *Fatherless Sons* and *Tomorrow Is with Us*) to canonical novelists (e.g. Hugh MacLennan's *Barometer Rising*, Morley Callaghan's *They Shall Inherit the Earth*, Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman* are now translated into Romanian) and poetry anthologies (Andrițoiu and Șchiopu's anthology of French Canadian poets and Caraion's anthology of English Canadian poets). Furthermore, we could argue that the intercultural literary dialogue between Romania and Canada took a step forward since Romanian critics and reviewers were showing a keener interest in Canadian letters than before (e.g. Mircea and Georgeta Pădureleanu's 1985 Torontonion encounter with Morley Callaghan published in *România literară/ Literary Romania*).

In the post-communist years, the intercultural literary dialogue between Romania and Canada is the most intense one mostly because Canadian Studies Centers were founded in

major universities of the country. Also, undergraduate and master programmes on Canadian-related issues were established and the first doctoral theses and academic papers were published in the field. Moreover, the increasing interest in Canadian Studies and Canadian literature reflected at the level of translations from Canadian authors and the critical studies devoted to them testifies to the strengthening of this intercultural dialogue. If the first decade after the fall of the communist regime mainly saw the publishing of works that were unavailable during the communist years (e.g. the translations from William Gibson's SF novels and a series of cheap sensational novels), after 2000 many novels by important Canadian authors were translated, not to mention the critical pieces devoted to them (not only in periodicals, but also in academic writings where Margaret Atwood, Leonard Cohen and Michael Ondaatje are usually discussed in individual chapters). Last but not least, after 1989 new media of reception could be encountered, i.e. film adaptations of Canadian novels and the distribution of literature with daily papers at low prices. Literary criticism, another mark of the intercultural dialogue between Romania and Canada, developed as well, the number of critical references exceeding by far the previous periods (e.g. more than 100 articles on English Canadian authors came out in the important (on-line and printed) Romanian periodicals as compared to (about) 50 in the pre-communist and communist years).

### **Douglas Coupland in the Romanian cultural and literary polysystem**

In the context of the intercultural dialogue between Romania and Canada, we could argue that the major postmodern Canadian authors (i.e. Margaret Atwood, Michael Ondaatje and Leonard Cohen) are also the most translated ones after 1989 and a lot of articles are devoted to them in periodicals (more than a third of the total amount of criticism for English Canadian authors), apart from the studies in conference proceedings or the chapters in doctoral theses.

Douglas Coupland is an English Canadian novelist that occupies a peripheral position in the Romanian cultural and literary polysystem<sup>1</sup> in the larger context of the place of Canadian literature in Romania which has moved from margin to center since its beginnings as outlined above. He is as translated and as discussed by Romanian critics in periodicals as the science fiction writer William Gibson. In fact he is compared to him, as well as to Nick Bantock, the “three bestselling authors who seem utterly globalized, stylized, and deracinated producers of a ‘location-independent’ literature” (Paul Delaney, quoted in Petković, 2011: 194). Furthermore, if we were to refer to polysystem theory with its centre and periphery, it was argued that Coupland himself

“has always been well aware of postmodern conceptions of centre and margin. His characters choose to remain marginal or isolated, especially those in the early novels such as *Generation X*. By saying “We live small lives in the periphery; we are marginalized” (Coupland 1991: 11), the narrator Andy suggests that he and his friends decided to move away from the centre

<sup>1</sup> In our approach we draw on the Polysystem Theory as developed by the Israeli scholar Itamar Even-Zohar in the 1970s and enriched by the Translation Studies scholar from the same area, Gideon Toury in which a literary polysystem is reduced to a number of contrasting pairs that illustrate the status of translated literature according to its position in the host literary polysystem: a polysystem's centre vs. its periphery, canonized literary forms vs. non-canonized ones, and primary (innovatory) literary forms vs. secondary (conservative) ones. (Even-Zohar 2000, 193-194)

and embrace the fringe and seemingly futile, listless lives. The centre periphery axis for Coupland has become a north-south one in which California is the apocalyptic and (oxymoronically) poststructuralist centre. This intimate vision of the marginal, as well as the mixture of cynicism and sentimentality, has become Coupland's particular brand." (Petković, 2011: 190)

Thus, it can be argued that, within this marginality, settings and characters (not only in *Generation X*, but in most of his novels) are marks of effaced national identities that could belong to any place and any time.

The novelist, best-known for his masterpiece *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* (1991), coined the term "generation X" thus creating an instant classic with "his novel of disaffected twenty somethings contemplating an empty, irony-laden future of McJobs and designer furniture. Since then his novels have reflected an unerring instinct to tap into the shifting moods and preoccupations of the time" (Wittenborn 2006: 21). Four of his novels, i.e. *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture/ Generatia X: povești pentru cultura de accelerație* (2008), *All Families Are Psychotic/ Toate familiile sunt psihotice* (2008), *Miss Wyoming* (2009) and *Girlfriend in a Coma/ Tânără în comă* (2011) came out at Humanitas Publishing House ("Humanitas Fiction" collection) in unprefaced editions, signed by professional translators.

Douglas Coupland and his novels are discussed in periodicals such as *Adevărul literar și artistic/ The Literary and Artistic Truth*, *Contemporanul – Ideea Europeană/ The Contemporary – The European Idea*, *Lettre Internationale*, *Dilema veche/ The Old Dilemma* or *România literară/ Literary Romania*. The articles only tackle Coupland's *Generation X* and *Girlfriend in a Coma*, although *All Families Are Psychotic* and *Miss Wyoming* have also been translated into Romanian. Mihaela Constantinescu's *X-erii, generația ironică/ The X-ers, an Ironic Generation* published in 2001 focuses on the generation X and its aesthetics. The Romanian rewriter<sup>2</sup> (2001: 15) starts by providing the definition of the X-ers in *Webster's New World* as members of the generation X born between 1960s and 1970s who are apathetic, materialistic and scopeless. She also mentions that they earned their name from Coupland's novel, *Generation X* whose heroes left their important and satisfying jobs to move to the Californian desert and have the low-pay, low-prestige, low-benefit, no future McJobs. Constantinescu further makes impressionistic comments on the tales told by the members of the X generation, "contemporary fables of love and death, stories of nuclear waste and 'mall' culture". The X-ers are selfish and cynical, questioning fundamental values and the idea of authority in general. They are caught in-between the success of the previous generation of 'baby boomers' and the 'e' generation – the teenagers that have a passion for computers with their own business online at fourteen. The critic argues that the aesthetics of generation X is defined by a regeneration of the images that already exist in the media, drawing on postmodern authors such as Andy Warhol; they are concerned with the techniques of recycling and recontextualization from an ironical distance. Television lovers, the X-ers are also fond of postmodernism and parody, being closer to their friends, than to their family, a change in the hierarchy of relations that is also reflected in TV series that address them

<sup>2</sup> The term is used in the sense given by the Translation Studies scholar Andre Lefevere who refers to the agents that manipulate a text (be they translators, critics, commentators or annotators).

(*Friends*, *Melrose Place*, *Beverly Hills 90210*, also familiar to the Romanian public before the translation of the novel came out). The Romanian rewriter believes that the X generation is more than a chronological age: it is a way to see the world with cynicism, sarcasm, and irony, its members being part of the TV nation. Probably in order to reach a wider Romanian audience, Constantinescu concludes with a quote from Tyler Durden, the character of *Fight Club* (1999) played by Brad Pitt which grasps the essence of the X-ers.

Marius Chivu's *Romanul generației McJob/ Novel of the McJob Generation* is a review of the Romanian translation of *Generation X* that came out as *Generația X. Povești pentru cultura de accelerație* at 'Humanitas' Publishing House in 2008. The Romanian rewriter (2008: 10) introduces Coupland as the Canadian author who coined two important postmodern terms, namely 'McJob' and 'generation X'. His first novel in 1991, followed by Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting* and Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* are cult books of the 1990s. In rendering the novel's plot, Chivu mentions that 'Humanitas' has also published Coupland's other successful novel, *All Families Are Psychotic*. His definition of the X generation is that of people who come from dysfunctional families that despise the social compromises and careers of the yuppie generation. They feel the need for meditation and the discovery of the self by means of New Age practices and cherish the cult of friendship. Described as a transgressive novel with antisocial and nihilist characters in search of their identity in the middle of an alienated society, Coupland's novel does not have anything violent in it and the comments that come as comic strips in the book bring a touch of irony to the X-ers' life. Chivu claims that they have nothing in common with the cynical discourses and the dark philosophy in Palahniuk's novels. At the end of his article, Chivu wonders why the Romanian translator chose an adaptation for Coupland's registered mark 'McJob', rendered as McJug. The Romanian translator probably preferred a metaphorical image that symbolizes the low status and everything else that such a type of job entails, thus losing the consecrated English counterpart.

Alexandru Matei's *Cei din Generația X sunt puțin Friends?/ Are Those of the X Generation a Little Friends?* (2008: 24) starts with a remark on the excellent Romanian version of the *X Generation*, a novel that was written in 1987 when *The Closing of the American Mind* by Allan Bloom came out. The critic advises the Romanian reader to buy the book so as to become familiar with generation X, a sociological fact of American pop culture. Moreover, he expresses his regret that the novel was translated so late; it would have been probably differently received if it had been translated ten or four years before when novels on similar topics by Romanian authors became available on the market (e.g. Marius Ianuș's *Manifest anarhist și alte fracturi/ An Anarchist Manifesto and other Fractures* and Ionuț Chiva's 69). At the end of his short critical piece, Matei claims that the difference between the X generation and the previous one is not noticeable if we were to leave aside the wealth-austerity dimension; they are both trademarks of the new social and cultural identity launched on the market.

The most recent articles on Coupland are reviewing his *Girlfriend in a Coma* which came out in 2001 at 'Humanitas' Publishing House as *Tânără în comă*. Marius Chivu's *Planeta, în comă /The planet in a Coma* and Florin Irimia's *Apocalipsa după Coupland/The Apocalypse of Coupland* make use of a narrative approach to the novel. Chivu's article (2011: 6) focuses on the main theme of the novel, i.e. people die if they lose their goals and do not

permanently question their existence, illustrated as an apocalyptic scenario of post-industrial consumerism. He concludes by drawing a parallel to *Generation X* where Coupland was the gap between Salinger's innocent world and Palahniuk's social cynicism, whereas in the present novel he resembles Vonnegut in his prophetic and (too) moralist dimension. Irimia (2011: 27) recommends the novel to readers that like apocalyptic and amazing novels in the excellent translation signed by Iulia Gorzo.

*Girlfriend in a Coma/ Tânără în coma* is also Coupland's only work that was introduced to the Romanian public through a different medium since it was presented by the Romanian critic Dan C. Mihăilescu in his short literary programme *Omul care aduce cartea/ The man who brings you books* on the private broadcaster ProTv in March 2011. If in terms of literary achievements, Coupland is generally compared to Kerouac and Salinger, Mihăilescu argues that the Canadian author's novel also resembles Fowles's *Daniel Martin* and Ovidiu Verdeș's *Muzici și faze/ Music and Stuff* due to the gang of friends that get together for sex, drugs and alcohol.

## Conclusions

In our paper we showed that since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the intercultural literary dialogue between Romania and Canada has developed, Canadian literature moving from margin to centre in our polysystem. However, when speaking of (English) Canadian authors in the post-communist years, we have to admit that Douglas Coupland's position is a marginal one.

The few critical pieces on his novels that came out in Romanian periodicals discuss *Generation X* and *Girlfriend in a Coma* and center on the definition of the X generation, also referring to the movies that address it (*Friends*, *Melrose Place*, *Beverly Hills 90210*). Comparisons to other authors and their works include not only international figures such as Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting*, Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*, J.D. Salinger and Kurt Vonnegut, but also Romanian novelists such as Marius Ianuș's *Manifest anarhist și alte fracturi/ An Anarchist Manifesto and other Fractures* and Marius Chivu's 69. Short comments on the quality of the translations are also made: Irimia argues that we are dealing with an 'excellent' Romanian version of *Girlfriend in a Coma* and Marius Chivu shows his disagreement with respect to the adaptation of 'McJob', rendered by 'McJug' in *Generația X. Povești pentru cultura de accelerație*. *Girlfriend in a Coma* is also Douglas's only novel made known to the Romanian public through a different medium, i.e. a literary programme on television.

**Acknowledgements:** This work was supported by the strategic grant POSDRU/159/1.5/S/140863, Project ID 140863 (2014), co-financed by the European Social Fund within the Sectorial Operational Program Human Resources Development 2007 – 2013.

## Bibliography

- Chivu, Marius (2011) "Planeta, în comă". In *Adevărul literar și artistic*, no. 1072, p. 6
- Chivu, Marius (2008) "Romanul generației McJob". In *Adevărul literar și artistic*, no. 923, p. 10.



- Constantinescu, Mihaela (2001) “X-erii, generația ironică”. In *Contemporanul – Ideea Europeană*, no. 16, p. 15.
- Even-Zohar, Itamar (2000) “The Position of Translated Literature within the Literary Polysystem”. In Venuti, Lawrence (ed.) *The Translation Studies Reader*, London and New York: Routledge, pp. 192-198.
- Gordić Petrović, Vladislava (2011) “Getting at the Kernel of Canadianness: Douglas Coupland’s *Souvenir of Canada*”. In Novaković, Jelena, Pajović, Slobodan, Gvozden, Vladimir (eds.) *(Re)connecting Through Diversity: Canadian Perspectives/ Les relations dans la diversité: perspectives canadiennes*, Beograd: Megatrend University, 2011, pp. 189-195.
- Irimia, Florin (2011) “Apocalipsa după Coupland”. In *România literară*, no. 14, p. 27.
- Lupu, I., Ștefănescu C. (coord.) (1997) *Bibliografia relațiilor literaturii române cu literaturile străine în periodice (1919-1944)* vol. 2, București: Editura Academiei Române.
- Matei, Alexandru (2008) “Cei din Generația X sunt puțin Friends?”. In *Dilema veche*, no. 229, p. 24.
- Mihăilescu, Dan C. (2011) “Tânără în comă”. *Omul care aduce cartea*, ProTV, March 2011, available on [http://www.protv.ro/video/omul-care-aduce-cartea\\_322\\_douglas-coupland-tanara-in-coma\\_12018.html](http://www.protv.ro/video/omul-care-aduce-cartea_322_douglas-coupland-tanara-in-coma_12018.html)
- Wittenborn, Dick (2006) “Douglas Coupland vs. Naomi Klein”. In Hicklin, Aaron (ed.) *The Revolution Will Be Accessorized*, introduction by Jay McInerney, Toronto: HarperCollins Publishers Ltd, pp. 21-34.