

An overview of Romanian Literature

Introduction

First, I will start by saying that Romania has a long history in terms of literature. The first known text was a letter written in 1521 by Neacșu de Câmpulung.

And the first printed book was a Christian book of Coresi in 1559 and it is only in 1688 that the first Bible was printed in Romanian.

Actually I will present you the main authors of different periods in Romanian history. We will talk about authors who are called « Cronicari » of the 16th and 17th century. Then authors of the literary circle « Junimea » during the 19th century. After that we will see an important period which is the interwar and the after war with many famous authors that lived and wrote abroad. And in the end, we will talk about modern Romanian literature.

Cronicari (1) : Grigore Ureche (1590-1647)

Humanism was an European movement that showed a real faith in Human Nature. But, on the contrary of Erasmus' literature for example, the Romanian authors of this period, even if they are also considered, in a way as Humanist, have not written about Man but more about the land and the history of this land and that is why they are called « cronicari », because they were doing chronics, which are a sort of short stories.

Grigore Ureche is one of the main Romanian authors of this period. His only book was a chronic which is called *Chronic of the Moldavian history*. He was actually a Moldavian but he considered himself also as a Romanian because he was speaking the same language as the Valaques, which are inhabitants of a Romanian region.

Cronicari (2) : Miron Costin (1633-1691)

Another main figure of this period is Miron Costin. He was in fact also a Moldavian and he was a really important politician at that time. Indeed, he was a diplomat, he was polyglott and very patriotic.

He is considered as the first real Romanian historiographer because he completed Grigore Ureche's book by adding new historical elements. The book is now called *Chronic of the Moldavian history (from Aron Voda until today)*. But he wrote many other pieces of literature like poems and translations from Greek and Latin books.

Cronicari (3) : Dimitrie Cantemir (1673-1723)

Dimitrie Cantemir is a really important figure for Romanian history because he was the Prince of Moldavia for one year.

He could speak 11 languages, he was an encyclopedist, a mathematician, a composer, an architect, a historian, a cartographer, a philosopher, a very important politician figure close of the Russian Tsar Peter the Great and of course he was a writer.

He wrote many books but his last one is the most important : *The history of the the long age of Roumano-moldo-valaques*. It shows the latinity of Romanians and the role of the main Romanian principalities (which are called « danubiennes ») who played a major role in the defense of Europe against the Tatars first and then against the ottomans.

He also wrote books on the ottoman civilization, on Islam and on the Arabic language and he also wrote the first Romanian novel which is *The History of hyeroglyps* in 1705 which is a political pamphlet.

Junimea (1) : Ion Creanga (1837-1889)

So, now we will talk about another period, which is the 19th century, with authors from the Junimea literary circle. The Junimea Society is actually an association founded by different figures who had close links with France.

The term « Junimea » comes from the word « Juni » that is an old word to say « young », so these authors inspire a new sort of literature. It lasted from 1880 to 1916 after the end of WWI because many members of this society helped Germany and not France during the war.

First of all we will talk about Ion Creanga. He comes from a rural area and his works are inspired from this modest life that he describes with sincerity and a bit of naivety.

He is in fact a storyteller who wrote in prose a popular literature. He wrote many short stories for children with a moral at the end and for that he can be compared to the French authors François Rabelais or Charles Perrault.

But he really became famous after his death with the posthum publication of his book *Memories of childhood*.

Junimea (2) : Mihai Eminescu (1850-1899)

Now I will present you one of the major figures of Romanian literature, who is also the last European Romantic : Mihai Eminescu. If you have to remember only one Romanian author, it is him.

The famous historian Nicolae Iorga considers him as the Godfather of Romanian modern language because his texts were full of words from different Romanian regions and he created new words with his philosophical readings. He was one of the first authors to use metaphors which were really rare in Romanian poetry.

He was in fact a poet and wrote many poems since he was very young on a large range of themes. There are poems about nature, love, history and he was one of the first poets to write about Romanian contemporary problems of the time.

His poems were so famous that they were translated in more than 60 languages.

His main poem is called « Luceafarul », which is « Hypérion » in French and « Evening Star » in English. This poem is in the Guinness Book of records as the longest love poem ever. Indeed, it is 98 stanzas long.

So Eminescu is represented as a genius because of his works but also because of his bohemian life : he didn't want to have any diplomas, didn't want to be on a high social rank, didn't want to be rich, didn't want to marry and he refused all the prizes that were proposed to him.

During his last years he was mentally ill, suffered from psychosis, he was maniac-depressive and he probably died of syphilis.

Today, he is considered in Romania as the « National Poet » and is a real symbol. There are statues of him everywhere in the country and his face is printed on banknotes.

Junimea (3) : Ion Luca Caragiale (1852-1912)

Ion Luca Caragiale is considered as the main Romanian playwright and novelist due to his works that are a critic of Romanian society at the end of the 19th century.

He is more a neoclassic author, a realist and a naturalist but some of his works are also fantastic or turned toward historic fiction. Some of his books are *In time of war* or *Momente și schițe*, there is no real translation for the word 'schițe'.

Caragiale was a member of the Romanian Academy but as a posthumous title.

Famous authors who lived abroad (1) : Tristan Tzara (1896-1963)

We will now talk about important authors that you may have heard about because they have lived abroad, and for most of them they have lived in France and have written in French.

First of all, Tristan Tzara. He's real name was Samuel Rosenstock but he changed his name because Tristan was a reference to the hero of Wagner's opera *Tristan and Isolde* and also means « sad » because « triste » means « sad » and Tzara because it has the same pronunciation as the Roman word for « country » which is « țara ». Therefore we can understand that he was « Sad in his country ».

Actually he lived some years in Zürich and with some friends he created the movement « dada » or « dadaism » which is a movement that arose as a reaction to World War I and the nationalism that many thought had led to the war. It is a questioning of all the conventions and the ideological, esthetic and political constraints.

During this period Tristan Tzara wrote some books as *Seven Manifestos dada* (1924) or *The first celestial adventure of Mr Antipyrine* (1916).

In the twenties he went to Paris and made some friends as André Breton or Louis Aragon and wrote other books as *The Second Celestial Adventure of Mr. Antipyrine* or *The Flight : dramatical poem in four acts and one epilogue* (1947).

Famous authors who lived abroad (2) : Emil Cioran (1911-1995)

We will now talk about Emil Cioran that you may know with the French pronunciation. He was first writing in Romanian but as he was refused to stay in Romania because of the communist regime he went to Paris and there he wrote in French.

One of his main important books is *Sur les cimes du désespoir* (1933), which is also the first book that he wrote at the age of 22. When fascism and antisemitism arose he fought against and wrote *Transfiguration of Romania* (1936).

One year after this publication, in 1937, he went to Paris and never returned to Romania and after WWII, the communists prohibited his books.

All his books are really ironic and apocalyptic, he was a pessimist and a sceptic and this can be really seen in his books *Of the inconvenience to have been borned* (1973) which is about the absurdity of life and the human condition or *Syllogisms of bitterness* (1952) which is a collection of thoughts.

Famous authors who lived abroad (3) : Eugène Ionesco (1909-1994)

And the last author of this category is Eugène Ionesco. His real name was Eugen Ionescu but he change it to sound more French. He in fact travelled all his life between France and Romania. He lived with his mother and sister in France during the WWI. And in 1925 he went to live with his father in Romania but Ionesco hated him because he was an opportunist, a fascist and a communist. So he came back to France.

He is well known for his absurd theater. He composed his main play in 1947 *La Cantatrice chauve* that is still played today every evening at the Théâtre de la Huchette in Paris. In 1959 he wrote another important play *Rhinocéros* which is more or less about totalitarianism.

He wrote of course many other plays or books and arrived at the French Academy (Académie Française) in 1970.

Modern Romanian literature

As you may have seen there are no famous female authors in Romania, only males and this is due to the fact that Romania is a patriarchal country.

This also leads to the facts that some themes are taboo in Romanian literature such as sexuality, homosexuality and so on. But some new authors try to change that as Cecilia Stefanescu who wrote *Morbid Connections (Liaisons morbides* in French) who made a scandal in Bucharest, because it talks about female homosexuality.

There is another significant problem with Romanian literature : it is hard to understand. In fact, the communist dictatorship under Ceaucescu forced the authors to hide what they were saying under lots of diversions in their books and don't really go straight to the point.

For example the prose of the main modern author, Mircea Catarescu, is really hard to understand. However, this author received a lot of prizes for his novels and essays from all over the world (such as American, French, German, Swiss or Italian prizes). His main novel is *Why do we love women ?* (2008) and *Le Levant* for which he received the Goncourt Prize.

Today we observe a rebirth of Romanian literature after 50 years of communism and generally with a constant growth in the popularity of the modern authors.