

VI. VARIA

EUGEN SIMION – CULTURAL PRESENCE IN SERBIA

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Abstract:

This paper seeks to examine the impact of academician Eugen Simion on the literary landscape in Serbia, focusing on his contributions to fostering cultural exchange between the two neighbouring countries. Additionally, it explores his efforts to promote Romanian creativity and his perspectives on Serbian artistic expression. Furthermore, this paper will analyse the reception of Simion’s works in Serbia it will delve into the collaborations and partnerships he established with Serbian literary institutions, highlighting the lasting legacy of his efforts to strengthen cultural ties between Romania and Serbia.

Keywords:

Eugen Simion, Serbia, Romania, translations, cultural dialogue

Eugen Simion’s literary works have not only been well received in Serbia, but they have also played an important part in presenting both Romanian literary works and how foreigners interpret Serbian literary expression. Simion’s cooperation with Serbian literary institutions has created a long-lasting cultural interchange between Romania and Serbia, strengthening the two countries’ bonds and leaving an indelible mark on both artistic communities. Given that the usual mechanism by which two nations become familiar with each other is through literary works rather than literary history and theory, Simon’s presence is all the more notable.

Contrary to widespread belief, Simon's presence in Serbia is not recent. A search of the database covering all libraries in Serbia¹ reveals that the author's works written since the late 1960s have been available. It is crucial to note, however, that these works are written in Romanian, thus a very limited audience could read them, namely Romanian community from Serbia. For the purposes of this article, we shall note Simion's publications as they were published in Serbia and in Serbian language², with a particular emphasis on texts that were specifically interesting to Serbian public, but also identifying omitted information that was not made available to Serbian readers. We will note and how Simion's work was analysed and received within the Serbian cultural sphere.

The Interviews

There are three interviews in Serbian press that are of particular interest for our paper. It is worth noting that the Serbian audience is introduced to Simion's work in their local language via a translated version of the interview titled "A New World Cannot Be Built with Old Hatred."³ The interview was first published in Romania in March 1990, but it was not translated into Serbian until 1996, following the end of the conflict that led to Yugoslavia's breakup. This interview is significant in two ways: first, because of its contextual relevance, and second, because of its temporal distance from the original publication.

This Serbian version, translated by Miljana Vukadinović and Velmir Kolundžija⁴, lacks additional information that readers would find useful, for example, a concise exposition and introduction of Eugen Simion; the identity of the interviewer, and the journal in which it was published are not acknowledged. These omitted elements may impair readers' understanding of the interview's context and reliability. A brief review of Simion's credentials and the repute of the

¹ See: <https://plus.cobiss.net/cobiss/sr/sr/bib/search?q=eugen+simion&db=cobib&sort=py&mat=allmaterials&start=0>.

² According to the database, E. Simion is present with 20 books in Romanian language, five books and 15 articles translated into Serbian language.

³ The interview „O lume nouă nu se poate construe cu o ură veche” was initially published in “Flacăra” journal, no. 9, 1st of March, 1990, and it was conducted by George Arion, cf. *Cronologia vieții literare românești. Perioada postcomunistă I, 1990*, 2014, pp. 98-99.

⁴ E. Simion, 1996, pp. 7-14.

journal would improve the overall context and reliability of the translated version. However, given the time of its appearance in Serbia, the title alone may have piqued the interest of the prospective audience.

Eugen Simion's interview provides insights into Romania's socio-political landscape during and immediately following the 1989 Revolution. He also covers the subsequent developments that happened, as well as the efforts made by the cultural elite to impact societal changes both within and outside their realm. Literature discussion inevitably includes a consideration of writers' roles during the communist era, as well as various judgements from different perspectives of their activities and the impact on their literary works. To varied degrees, the aforementioned themes developed in Serbia following the end of the conflict and the disintegration of Yugoslavia in 1996. Despite the differing historical conditions, Serbia first went on a process of reconsidering the meanings of "Serbian" and "Yugoslav"⁵ following the war. This assessment included, among other things, a review of public figures that had identified themselves with one or more of the conflict's parties due to a variety of causes. This investigation is concerned with the extent to which personal beliefs and political affiliations can influence the reception and evaluation of artistic or intellectual contributions in a society that has undergone significant changes, such as a political regime change or a civil war, as demonstrated by the cases of Romania and Serbia, respectively. Examining popular figures in Romania reveals if personal opinions and political affiliations influenced the acceptance and evaluation of artistic or intellectual contributions throughout the transition from communism to democracy. This investigation focuses on the complicated relationship between ideology, censorship, and artistic freedom in a country undergoing political transformation. Similarly, the aftermath of a civil war in Serbia prompted a critical assessment of public people who allied with various forces, revealing insight on how these connections shaped the perception and judgement of their own work. Given the circumstances, the six-year delay in publishing the translated interview, as well as the specific subject matter discussed, can be interpreted as a deliberate and thought-

⁵ "Yugoslav" sized to exist, so in press appeared discussion of what is "Serbian", "Bosnian", "Croatian", "Macedonian" etc.

provoking approach to addressing the challenges faced by these neighbouring countries, albeit in distinct circumstances and with obvious time differences.

Nataša Jovanović conducted the second interview with Eugen Simion, which was published on November 13, 2015, in the weekly journal "Pečat", under the suggestive title "Eugen Simion: European East and West - the dialogue has not died"⁶. From the interview, we are not informed about the reason for the conversation, but based on the publishing date, we can conclude that it took place during the Belgrade Book Fair, which is organised every year in the last week of October.

This interview combines presentation of both the interlocutor and his culture with his stance on Romanian-Serbian intercultural connections. We will look at questions related to the impact of globalism on what is commonly named "small cultures" and the questions that refer to the cultural cooperation between Serbia and Romania, at that time. Unfortunately, as far as we know, Eugen Simion's answers to this interview have not been kept in their original form (we know E. Simion did not speak Serbian), thus we will have to offer a "translation of a translation", which is avoided in practise, but necessary in this instance.

The undertones in this interview are particularly interesting, because they show political currents in Serbia. Even in the case of questions about Romanian culture, the issues are placed somewhat in a political context (the interwar period, the dialog between the European East and West in the context of existentialism, the communist period, dissidents). This subtext becomes more apparent when the questions shift from Romanian culture towards broad queries about the Balkans, and the especially about Serbia. The first topic that moves the interview from Romanian culture is about the Anglo-Saxon factor and its impact on the loss of national identity. Although this question implies the expected response, Simion chooses to be objective as much as it's possible. While the first sentences – "*It is evident*" and "*Americans impose their model and criteria*" – validate the feelings that exist in so-called "small cultures", that they feel marginalised in the world of globalisation, E. Simion draws attention to the fact that this is happening everywhere, including Western Europe. He will deviate from such a difficult subject by mentioning the French essayists who "*constantly mourn the fate of the*

⁶ „Еуђен Симион: Европски исток и запад – дијалог није замро“, <https://www.pecat.co.rs/2015/11/eudjen-simion-evropski-istok-i-zapad-dijalog-nije-zamro/>

death of the novel”, claiming that they are correct “*because France is the land of novelists that no longer have novelists*”. However, he will mention Tzvetan Todorov’s idea as one possible solution for the “*literature in crisis*”, namely that the literature must return to human destiny⁷. Thus, Simion manages to answer tactfully, without failing into a trap by deviating from the line imposed by the question.

The following question in the interview shows even more clearly the foreign policy relations that Serbia had with the West:

*“Can the Orthodox nations of the Balkans preserve their identity within the EU, since it was created on the founding values of the Holy Roman Scriptures and Napoleon’s conquests, which are deeply opposed to the Byzantine heritage?”*⁸

Even the most seasoned diplomats could have fallen victim to a question phrased in this manner. There is a clear effort to find justifications for the anti-EU sentiment that persisted in Serbia after the end of bombings in 1999. E. Simion again manages to avoid to give an answer that could be used as an argument in possible later discussions:

“The conflict between Orthodox, Catholics and Protestants is unimportant. Pope John Paul II visited Romania as the first Christian country⁹. He imposed that tone in which the churches can come to understanding among themselves. Big powers and big capitals

⁷ The full answer to the question: „То је евидентно. То се догађа свуда, чак и на европском западу. Читам француске есејисте који стално оплакују судбину изумрлог романа. Под утицајем Англосаксонаца свесни су како се књижевни канон мења. Американци намећу свој модел и критеријум. Чињеница је да су француски есејисти у праву пошто је Француска земља романијера која више нема романијера. Веома занимљива личност у француској књижевности је Цветан Тодоров који је Бугарин. Својевремено је преводио на француски руске формалисте. Пре две године објавио је прави манифест, књигу *Књижевност је у опасности*. Износи идеју да се књижевност мора враћати на људску судбину. Управо је то теза, без лажне скромности, моје књиге *Повратак аутору*“.

⁸ „Да ли православни народи Балкана могу да сачувају свој идентитет у оквиру ЕУ будући да је она настала на вредносним темељима Светог римског царства и Наполеонових освајања који се дубоко противе византијском наслеђу?“, <https://www.pecat.co.rs/2015/11/eudjen-simion-evropski-istok-i-zapad-dijalog-nije-zamro/>

⁹ We believe that here appeared an error in translation from Romanian or French language (there is no information in which language the interview was conducted) to Serbian language.

*shape politics. First and foremost, the Balkan countries should all join the EU. Serbs who are not members of this community already have European culture”.*¹⁰

Nataša Jovanović will try one more time to provoke Simion concerning the Western powers, mentioning the *Penser l'Europe* symposium, founded by Simion. She will ask him a question on how the intellectuals participating at this forum evaluate Europe and the EU, avoiding directing the answer this time.

There are only two questions that directly address the relations and collaborations between Romania and Serbia. One question is about collaboration between two Academies, where E. Simion mentions that the collaboration among institutions was much better while Dejan Medaković was president of Serbian Academy of Science and Arts. But, his answer gives us the glimpse of times that will come in building a relation between these two countries: Simion states that during this visit to Belgrade, he was invited to a meeting at Serbian Academy. The last question of the interview addresses the support Simion has given to Serbia during the 1990s:

*“Cooperation was difficult, if not dangerous, at the time. The Minister of Culture who visited Serbia in the 1990s was threatened with resignation. Many writers, poets, and intellectuals attempted to assist their Serbian colleagues. During the NATO bombardment of Serbia in 1999, the Academy of Science, which I led, proclaimed full solidarity with Serbs. I brought that letter of support to Serbia and read it at a public assembly”.*¹¹

The third interview was conducted by Radmila Gikić Petrović and appeared in 2019¹², after the publication of *Young Eugene Ionesco* in Serbian translation. The responses that Eugen Simion gave in Romanian language were preserved, and this interview was also published in Romanian, in “Caiete Critice”,

¹⁰ „Сукоб између православаца, католика и протестаната није битан. Папа Јован Павле Други дошао је у посету Румунији као првој хришћанској земљи. Он је наметнуо тај тон да се цркве између себе могу споразумети. Политику формирају велике силе и велики капитали. Балканске земље у првом реду треба да уђу у ЕУ. Срби који нису у овој заједници већ имају европску културу.”

¹¹ „У то време сарадња је била тешка, могу да кажем и опасна. Министру културе који је 90-их посетио Србију претили су оставком. Многи писци, песници и интелектуалци покушавали су да нађу начин и помогну својим колегама у Србији. Академија наука на чијем челу сам био изразила је 1999. пуну солидарност са Србима у време НАТО бомбардовања. То писмо подршке донео сам у Србију и прочитао на јавном скупу.”

¹² E. Simion, R. Gikić-Petrović, 2019, pp. 105-111.

in 2023. The significance of this interview stems from the fact that it is the only one of Simion's interviews in Serbia in which the entire conversation is devoted to the book about Ionesco. There are no implicit or explicit questions about culture in political context, politics in general or Romanian-Serbian relations.

The Articles

Coinciding with the publication of Adam Puslojić's translation of the book titled *The Demon of Theory is Tired*¹³, the presence of the Eugen Simion within Serbian periodicals will increase. It appears that these articles are extracts from E. Simion's books and other writings, translated in Serbian language. Unfortunately, a comprehensive analysis of the Serbian text alongside a Romanian source variant is required in order to ascertain whether the translations in question are mere ordinary renderings, or if they represent adaptations of pre-existing Romanian texts with the intention of catering to the Serbian audience, or the texts have been specifically written with Serbian reader in mind. Considering the fact that both Romania and Serbia have not yet completed the process of fully digitizing their library collections, it is important to note that this almost forensic approach to comparing translated text with potential Romanian original poses significant challenges. Additionally, the existing published texts lack explicit indication as to whether they are the translations from pre-existing writings or if texts were intentionally crafted for a foreign readership. Nevertheless, there are two writings in particular that are interesting, in the context of Romanian-Serbian relations.

The first article we will discuss appeared in the "Savremenik" journal in 1997¹⁴, and is a review of Marijana Dan's book *The Fantasy in Romanian Literature*¹⁵ and it was integral part of this study. Although it is clear that this review was written for Serbian reader (we do not know if this review was ever published in Romania or in Romanian language), the subject is what E. Simion knows: Romanian literature. Considering the book "*ambitious, scholarly, and daring in its ideas and critical imagination*"¹⁶, E. Simion observes that Marijana Dan

¹³ E. Simion, *Уморан је демон теорије (Demonul teoriei a obisit)*, 2004.

¹⁴ E. Simion, 1997, pp. 105-107.

¹⁵ *Фантастично у румунској књижевности*.

¹⁶ „амбициозна, учена, смела у својим идејама и у критичарској маштовитости“, E. Simion, 1997, p. 105.

opens a new, not yet explored chapter about specificity of Romanian writings in comparison to those from Eastern Europe. Nonetheless, E. Simion concentrates more on explaining the concept of fantasy and its significance in Romanian literature, placing it in the perspective of broader universal critical thought, reserving a few selected sentences that commend Marijana Dan's endeavour. Finally, it should be noted that Marijana Dan's book was published in Serbian. If we ask how it is possible for E. Simion to write a review of a book that is written in a language not known to him, the only logical answer we can give is based on the fact that Marijana Dan is a Romanian who moved to Serbia and is a professor at the University of Belgrade. We presume that a Romanian variant of this book was given to Simion so he could write his review.

The second article is a translated *Forward*¹⁷ to *Diplomatic Reports from Bucharest (1937-1939)*, reports written by Jovan Dučić, translated to Romanian language by Dorin Gamulescu and published in 1998 (Universal Dalsi). The translation of this *Forward* by Adam Puslojić was published in Serbian in 2004, in "Nova zora" journal. Although available in both languages, this *Forward* is interesting, because represents one of the rare Simion's articles about Serbian literature. Although the book itself is a selection of diplomatic reports and do not include any of Jovan Dučić's literary work, E. Simion is captivated by the aesthetics of writing style and thought processes of this Serbian writer and diplomat. This discovery is twofold: firstly, E. Simion discovers an original, talented Serbian writer; secondly, he discovers interwar Romania seen through the eyes of a foreign diplomat. E. Simion will say:

"You should read Jovan Dučić. His reports speak of a tragic history and the European world, seen from Bucharest, by a first-rate moralistic writer".¹⁸

This *Forward* will not be limited only to the reports signed by Dučić. Simion will look into the book of essays *Cities and Chimeras*, published in Romanian translation in 1939. And those writings will fascinate him even more:

¹⁷ E. Simion, „Истраживач уметности и апостол људске добротe“, („The Researcher of Art and Apostle of Human Kindness“), 2004, pp. 284-291.

¹⁸ „Треба читати Јована Дучића. Његови извештаји говоре о једној трагичној историји и европском свету, виђеном из Букурешта, од стране једног писца моралисте прворазредне вредности.“, E. Simion, 2004, p. 287.

“What I like the most about his intellectual revelations is the fact that, in a century full of horrors, he continues to believe that European man will be saved through his culture”.¹⁹

Evidence of E. Simion’s admiration for Dučić’s work can be once again confirmed by his wish to see a translation into Romanian of Dučić’s essays and diplomatic writings published in a single volume. Simion believed that a translation of Dučić’s work would not only acquaint Romanian readers to this great Serbian writer, but also deepen the cultural exchange between the two nations. This wish remains unfulfilled to this day.

In addition to the aforementioned texts, it is worth noting that there were numerous others, primarily sections from Simion’s previously published books or essays in Romania²⁰, translated into Serbian. We chose not to include them, as while they did add to Simion’s fame and the promotion of Romanian literature in Serbia, these works do not offer any novel insights for future researchers and critics studying Simion’s work.

The Book Translations

As previously mentioned, the translation of Simion’s books began in 2004 with the book *The Demon of Theory is Tired*²¹. This translation was followed by *Romanian Existentialism and European Metaphysics*²² (2016), *Young Eugène Ionesco*²³ (2018), *Cioran: The Mythology of Unfulfillment*²⁴ (2019), and *Mircea Eliade: Knots and Signs of Prose*²⁵ (2021). Compared to other Romanian cultural figures, and excluding writers²⁶, E. Simion is the most translated Romanian in Serbia.

The book *Romanian Existentialism and European Metaphysics* is the most intriguing of the five translations. It was translated by four people: Adam Puslojić,

¹⁹ „Оно што ми се изузетно допада у његовим интелектуалним открићењима јесте чињеница да, у једном веку пуном ужаса, он наставља да верује како ће европски човек бити спасен путем своје културе.“, E. Simion, 2004, p. 291.

²⁰ Without the possibility of comparative reading of these texts (not all of them are available in digital form yet, so access is very limited), we admit the possibility that articles translated into the Serbian language were slightly modified to make them more accessible to the Serbian readers, but we cannot claim this presumption.

²¹ *Уморан је демон теорије/Demonul teoriei a obisit.*

²² *Румунски егзистенцијализам и европска метафизика.*

²³ *Млади Ежен Јонеско/Tânărul Eugen Ionescu.*

²⁴ *Сиоран : митологија несавршености/Cioran : o mitologie a nedesăvârșirilor.*

²⁵ *Мирча Елијаде : чворови и знаци прозе/Mircea Eliade: nodurile și semnele prozei.*

²⁶ For comparison, according to the mentioned database: the most translated Romanian writers are Nichita Stănescu (8 books) and Mircea Cărtărescu (6 books).

Mirela Glušac, Ionela Mengher, and Simeon Lăzăreanu. Although this may appear strange, as translations involving more than two translators are uncommon, there is a logical explanation for this choice. And it is for this reason that the book is intriguing: this collection of essays was translated into Serbian before being published in their original form, that is, in Romanian language.

Published with the subtitle „*Four subjective philosophers who want to restore Romanian culture and one literary critic as a denier who discovers in 1943 the theatre of the absurd in the Romanian language*”²⁷, the book was initially interesting due to the essays on Mircea Eliade, Emil Sioran and Eugène Ionesco. These three prominent figures in Romanian culture entered in Serbian culture through the French and English cultural influences and translations. Their works written in the Romanian language was somewhat known, usually in the context that they were of “Romanian origins”. In addition to these three essays, in the book appear two essays dedicated to Constantin Noica and Mircea Vulcănescu, who were almost unknown within Serbian cultural sphere. Thus, E. Simion offers novel insights about three universally known personalities and introduces other two important figures of Romanian culture, consequently expanding Serbian understanding of Romanian cultural space and its evolution.

In his afterword, entitled “A Revealing, Exciting Study”²⁸, Srba Ignjatović will contextualize Simion’s essays within the present currents, highlighting the ongoing relevance of the concerns of Romanian intellectuals during the interwar period in era of globalization. Addressing concerns about globalization, concerns that obviously dominated Serbian public debates, Ignjatović will state that small nations (in the sense of small cultures) face the risk of losing their distinct identity due to the pressure to conform to global standards, leading to abandoning their national, cultural and spiritual traditions. Presenting the situation in this way, Ignjatović will recommend Simion’s essays as “*inevitable incentives for opening discussions about this global campaign as a project that has already advanced*

²⁷ „Четири субјективна филозофа који желе да обнове румунску културу и један књижевни критичар као негатор који открива 1943. театар апсурда на румунском језику”, E. Simion, 2016.

²⁸ „Откривалачка, узбудљива студија”, S. Ignjatović, 2016, p. 281-289.

considerably”²⁹. When we look at this afterword and read the questions from the interview conducted by Nataša Jovanović, we can see that Simion’s work was in some instances read as thought-provoking insights into the challenges faced by societies in maintaining their national, cultural, and spiritual traditions in the face of globalization. These essays in particular were observed as a valuable resource for discussing the importance of preserving cultural heritage in today’s rapidly changing world.

This book established Eugen Simion’s reputation in the minds of Serbian intellectuals as an unquestionable authority on the subject of Romanian literature and literature in general. The translations that followed were very successful; according to the publisher of the *Young Eugène Ionesco*, the entire print run was sold out in less than a year, which was unheard of for an Eastern European literary critic and historian³⁰.

Unfortunately, due to the fact that the libraries’ database in Serbia is still growing, we cannot find reliable information about number of articles, studies and reviews referring to E. Simion and his work; cross-referencing is still in its early stages, and so is the digitization of the materials. However, efforts are being made to expand the database and improve cross-referencing capabilities in Serbia’s libraries. As more materials are digitized, it is expected that reliable information about the number of articles, studies, and reviews referring to E. Simion and his work will become more readily available. This does not change the fact that E. Simion and his work were appreciated in Serbia at the highest level. In 2013, Serbian President Tomislav Nikolić presented E. Simion with the Gold Medal for his contributions to public and cultural activities³¹ and in 2018 he was elected for foreign member of Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts with the highest number of votes at that session³², among all the candidates.

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²⁹ „неизбежно подстицаје и за отварање расправе о том *глобалном походу* као пројекту који је увелико одмакао“, S. Ignjatović, 2016, p. 289.

³⁰ We would like to thank the publisher, Zoran Stojanović, for providing us with this information.

³¹ <https://www.kurir.rs/vesti/drustvo/655721/nikolic-odlikovao-strane-drzavnike-i-zasluzne-pojedince>

³² <https://www.sanu.ac.rs/izabrani-novi-clanovi-sanu/>

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