

Identity and Universality in the Work of Panait Istrati

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Introduction

IN ROMANIAN literature Panait Istrati is a special case. Before being acclaimed in literary circles, the future writer had a suicide attempt, notorious in the press, as any extraordinary event would be: in their editions of January 4 and 5, 1921, the local newspapers *L'Éclairneur de Nice*, *L'Éclairneur du Soir* and *Le Petit Niçois* announced and commented under the title “Les Désespérés” that “the Romanian citizen Gherasim Panait Istrati, aged 36 . . . tried to kill himself by cutting his throat with a razor . . . Unfortunately, it took more than half an hour for the police to be alerted and for the victim to be transported to the hospital. There’s little chance of surviving.”¹ A long letter addressed to Romain Roland was found on the dying person. Istrati’s editorial debut, two years later, was thus prefaced by this event, singular in its own way. One could say that in that morning at the beginning of the year, a future writer was born in the person struggling between life and death. Istrati’s existence (re)started from zero. Soon after that, glory became his companion, the doors of literary salons opened for him, he was showered by honors and presented with various awards. His works were consecutively published in French or/and Romanian and were almost simultaneously translated² as a recognition of their artistic, humanistic, and visionary value: *Kyra Kyralina* (1924), *Uncle Anghel* (1924), *Past and Future: Autobiographical Pages* (1925), *The Haiduks* (2 vols., 1925, 1926), *Codin* (1926), *Mikhaïl* (1927), *The Perlmutter Family* (1927, co-written with Josué Jéhouda), *Nerantula* (1927), *The Thistles of the Bănăgan* (1928), *The Sponge-Fisher* (1930), *Tsatsa-Minnka* (1931), *The Thüringer House* (1932), *The Employment Agency* (1933), *Mediterranean* (2 vols., 1934, 1935). His name flashed as a meteor over the literary landscape until 1935, when Panait Istrati died, afflicted by various ailments. Three quarters of a century later, the “heart” of his work continues to beat and bleed, condemned to experience the myth of Sisyphus. His work has not yet been redeemed from the man that he was, involved

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in the political, religious, or cultural debates of the first interwar years. His decision to denounce the injustices in the Soviet Union, published under the title *Confession for the Defeated* (1929) cost him enormously, since it triggered a massive press campaign against him. The French left-wing intelligentsia began boycotting his books, under instructions from the Third Communist International. The left-wing press labeled him an “outlaw for the State Secret Police,” while the right-wing writers discredited him as having been “the man of the Soviets,” although in that country the author was literally lynched by the press and smeared in literary dictionaries. All Romanian political regimes felt compelled to have a reckoning with Istrati. The re-entry of his literature into the public circuit was also a seismograph of the relationships with the Eastern ally. All of that hastened his end, but was not able to silence his work. Only two weeks before his death, Istrati signed a preface to the French translation of a book written by George Orwell,³ an action that could be interpreted as a ‘pay it forward’ act of courtesy.

Further equally relevant aspects could be mentioned in addition to this succinct profile. Travelling from one side of Europe to the other, from the freezing north of Russia to the Côte d’Azur, Istrati was considered “a vagabond genius.”⁴ The *Mediterranean* cycle of stories (*Sunset* and *Sunrise*) emphasized the qualities of this Romanian Ulysses, prone to adventure and to cordial friendship—traits thanks to which he was named “the pilgrim of the heart”⁵—, and for which he was however rewarded with a lot of disappointments. A further characteristic of his strong personality is represented by his aspiration to overcome his own condition. Although he started from the bottom and was educated at the school of misery and humiliation in life, Istrati was consumed by his thirst for reading, thus purging himself and becoming “a son of books,” as Mircea Iorgulescu—one of the most respected commentators of Istrati’s life and work—called him:

*In order to really understand him, the magnetism of reading is for him infinitely more important than the magnetism of his eternal departures, just as his steady attachment to books is infinitely more important than the steady attachment to wandering. In Istrati the wanderer one should see Istrati the reader; one with hundreds of transient jobs, the other with a unique, stable, passionate occupation. And, in fact, all his wandering through the world resembles a wandering into the majestic labyrinth of the Dictionary. It is decisive for Istrati to start the journey; to take the first step; to open the book: he will be seduced.*⁶

The description above outlines the complex fabric that underpins the significant profile of this unusual portrait of a writer, who has always been guided by morality and artistic consciousness, and was interested in the great topics of human existence.

Identity and Universality—the Relational Sphere

BEFORE SETTING up a place for Istrati within this context, some elements of cultural history—which could be partially substituted by the concepts of *identity* and *universality*—should be recalled. This pair of terms has relatively recently permeated the literary medium. For centuries, their ancestors had been terms like *national*

and *universal*, a pair which established the relationship between the part and the whole from a semantic-lexical point of view. This relationship has always been the focal point of interest within the field of comparative literature, whose aim is to ensure the circulation of national themes and motifs and their theoretical projection into a superstructure (world literature) organized into epochs, literary genres and species, or canonical structures.

In the 19th century, also known as “the century of historicism” or of “nations,” the research studies focused on determining contrasts and on delimitating parts from the whole as clearly as possible. The propensity of the phrase *national specificity* represented a summum of all historical crystallizations promoted at the universal level.

The 21st century offers a new perspective embodied by the term *globalization*, which indicates the moment in time when the European Union emerged as a communal space without borders and based on economic cohesion for all its constituent nations. From the cultural point of view, the meaning of national specificity faded within that new context, but its “spirit” did not, since, for example, the concept of ‘European culture’ is presented as a multicultural mosaic consisting of “identities” asserting their specific character and kinship, while highlighting the differences between them.⁷

In the case of Panait Istrati, the relationship described above narrows towards an indeterminate position, because neither the author nor his work fit into the previously mentioned paradigm. He was born in one country, then travelled a lot, and made his debut at the age of maturity in French, a language which was not his mother tongue. The recognition as a writer came from his fellow French writers and he was not properly accepted by his native country. The statements that he made in the name of his own conscience and resolutely enough to call the normative attention of Romanian inter-war criticism were taken into account. Inclement and inflexible in his options towards the traditionalist literary movement in Romania, the historian and literary critic Nicolae Iorga mainly disapproved of the Romanian topics of his books, using Kyra Kyralina as an example, a character who would undermine the unfaltering purity of Romanian women. According to Iorga, a European literary success with such a topic was a national disgrace. G. Călinescu,⁸ the Romanian critic most open to modernity, detected the exotic aspect of Istrati’s writing, yet he still minimized its importance, probably because his novels written in French had a certain style, which was paradoxically totally absent in his Romanian work. As noticed, Istrati’s adventurous life with all its tribulations permeated the Romanian literary scene, where he seemed to be alone against everyone. The label “a Romanian story teller, a French writer”⁹ applied (and still does) to the author of *The Thistles of the Bănăgan*. In response, Panait Istrati gave a proud reaction:

I am and I want to be a Romanian writer. I care about this, not because I was denied this right (by people with no authority!), but because what I feel may now be realized in French by an extraordinary chance, yet it springs from Romanian origins. Before being a French writer—as it is mentioned on the cover of the Rieder collection,—I was a Romanian innate writer. And if it is true that I did not achieve anything in the past to give me the right to be among the Romanian prose writers, the cause must be sought elsewhere than in my lack of goodwill or means.¹⁰

Even though his lifelong battle to obtain the official “citizenship” within the literature of his native country was an almost lost cause, in 1984—the year of the centennial anniversary of Istrati’s birth—the writer, now dead, was celebrated with national honors in both Romania, France, and Greece, three countries that are now claiming his work for their own literary patrimony.

Not at all unimportant for his literary destiny is the fact that he made his debut in 1923 in Paris, the capital city of world literature. At that time, writers from all continents frequented the cultural life of “the city of lights,” knowing that the recognition received from this authentic center of diplomacy as well as of literary intrigues would spread radially. In this respect, Istrati’s opportunity to be able to write in French opened him a door to universality. The cultural prestige of the French language and the very place of his “literary baptism” paved the way for consecration and success in France and in the world, maybe less in Romania, thus anticipating a concept unknown at that time, that of a European traveller. The title of the journal hosting his literary debut—*Europe*, no. 2, 1923—, supports this opinion.

One should also not ignore the fact that Istrati’s French was an approximate one, with errors in spelling and syntax, a matter which gives rise to two important issues. The first one concerns the identity character of his work, while the second one refers to its universal circulation, via the French language and its numerous translations. The identity character derives from the author himself, who thinks in Romanian, but writes in French. Two structurally different languages, one considered by linguists as synthetic and the other as analytic, are intertwined within the same mental content. In addition, because of the fact that the geographical space of some stories was Romanian, it was impossible to translate into Voltaire’s language indigenous words and idioms designating things, objects, or events with no connection to the French social area. That explains the preservation of phrases of *forma mentis* type, which illustrate the most intimate relation between being, history, and thought embodied by a language and which are therefore not translatable into another language. There are also several additional dozens of words of Romanian origin, relating to the Romanian specificity, ethos, or codes (religious, moral, cultural-historical, or of food) presented as such in stories like *Kyra Kyralina*, *Uncle Anghel*, *The Haiduks*, *Codin*, *The Thistles of the Bărăgan*, *The Employment Agency*, *Tsatsa-Minnka*. This fact also supports his opinion that he was above all a “Romanian innate writer.” Permeating the soil of a universal literature of great prestige, the identity elements lent a certain flavor and freshness, meant a gain in originality and offered some indefinable stylistic traits. All these come in contact with the issue of the patina of Istrati’s writing, which was acknowledged as a proper style in French literature precisely because of the invigorating intake of fresh blood.

In the case of Panait Istrati, the process of preparing manuscripts for printing included some preliminary steps. It is known that the editing version of his work benefited from the contribution of some “helping hands,”¹¹ French authors, who revised the original text in order to prepare it for the general public.

The disjunction between the synthetic thought of the narrator and the finished text, strained through the analytical retort of the French standard language, generated some interesting observations. Daniel Lerault,¹² one of the most well-known researchers

of Istrati's manuscripts, proved that, at the last reading before publishing the first Istratian stories, Romain Rolland also operated corrections and in some cases he chose the initial version, written by Istrati, to the detriment of the amendments proposed by the "helping hand." By preserving these little islands of Romanian specificity, Rolland did nothing else but strengthen a stylistic pattern.

As a simple conclusion, one can say that the French language represented for Istrati a first and not at all negligible opportunity: that of being integrated in a literature of high circulation and with a cultural prestige that reflected positively on his image as a writer.

Themes of Literature: Themes of Life

THemes and motifs in literature are practically unlimited, repetitive, recurrent, and inexhaustible. Even in antiquity, the inexistence of new, original topics was being deplored by an unknown author of the distant centuries, in one of the papyrus-rolls in the most famous and the oldest libraries of all time, the library of Alexandria. Yet, in literature, what matters is not the fact that "everything has been said," but "the way it has been said." Modality and content represent the most important aspects of the artistic message. Sociologists of literature have attributed to the art of word the role of filter between the thirst for knowledge that animates the human being and the great questions of existence: who are we?, what is life?, where do we come from?, what is our purpose on earth?, what are the universal laws (ethical, moral, physical, heavenly) that govern us?, how should we see birth and death?, which is our place and purpose in the movement of the universe? The answers to these questions lie behind the hidden wings of wisdom, accessible only to the great scholars of all times, the authors of abstract, theoretical, and closed philosophical systems. Those who made it accessible by translating it in everyday language are the writers. Various capacities are engaged in the effort called creation: the native talent, the visionary intuition, the ability to memorably recreate the events around us, be they the highest or the most common ones, the means of expression (style, psyche, affects, rhythms of the spiritual being, and linguistic codes) capable of transforming the truths and experiences of reality into an artistic and eminently reflexive register. In the true sense of the word, a great writer is the one who, in his unmistakable way, but still accessible to human sensitivity and phantasy, can render the issues of human existence. The great works of all time and of all evolutionary cycles of history are being selected from this privileged universal sphere, becoming thus, as Horatio said, *ere perennius*, above all fashion or contemporaneity.

In connection with this, some observations can be derived from Panait Istrati's work. Istratian humanism is heavily impregnated by a perfectly intuitive philosophical essence. Regarding *Kyra Kyralina*, some scholars have emphasized the narrative mirage of it, which led to several associations between the author and the Oriental storyteller of the *One Thousand and One Nights*. Undoubtedly, the "open" and circular nature of the events gives the reader the impression that the spell by which real life extends into a narrative existence must never have an end, because reaching such an end would make everything volatile. It is a way to go, but not the only one. Istrati's message and

plea regarding the imaginary journey in *Kyra Kyralina* is another one and has two defining elements. The first one refers to the innate narrative structure, the other one refers to the most important value for the reader, the idea of liberty. In the name of liberty (of expression, de circulation, of telling the truth), Panait Istrati wrote *Confession for the Defeated*, in which the documentary value prevails over the literary one, without however the latter being inferior. “The Arts and Humanity of Today,” a cycle of conferences held in Austria and Germany at the invitation of the Kultur Bund, should be placed under the same symbolic umbrella. On this occasion, Istrati made prophesies for the future, showing exceptional intuition:

I cannot explain why I have always considered artistic beauties as divinities meant to make man better, to civilize the world. Also, the idea of art for art's sake or art for nothing has not lived in my soul. As I could never understand how anyone can taste, admire or praise an artistic beauty and still remain a bad man, an egoist. It seems to me unimaginable that a human being can perfect his heart, soul, without having at the same time a vivid interest in what is happening around him; without becoming sensitive—if that was not already an innate feeling—after facing the innumerable miseries and injustices which afflict mankind. Human life is a darkness full of traps where, at any moment, either the body, or the soul, or often both of them together must bitterly pay for the favor of having known some benefits from creation. And the more one advances on the scale of moral perfection, the more sensible one becomes to the suffering that plagues people. Because it is impossible to be able to see, to understand, to feel everything and to still remain careless to the misfortunes of others. That is why I think that in the darkness of our lives art is our only light and perhaps the only hope for . . . universal gratification . . . able to change, in the course of the ages, the ugly face of the world. Of all the values, sentimental and spiritual, which lie at the basis of a superior life, art is the one that includes more love, more purity, and sincerity. She is the only one who never deceives us.¹³

Uncle Anghel is another Istratian masterpiece, whose subject matter is the probing of suffering within the world of vice. Those who know how to understand things shall uncover in this short story the essence of human value in places where it was not expected to be found. Right from the beginning, two devastating images strike through their blunt realism and their lack of any comfort for the reader: the images of the interior of the tavern and the one of the hero of the story. Few scenes such as those described by Panait Istrati in *Uncle Anghel* give rise to more harshness, horror, and disgust. In an artistic apotheosis, everything rises above human misery. The tavern is a ruin, and the absence of the roof released a cyclopean eye aimed at the sky, supporting the fact that the main character had a quarrel with God. Physically weakened and bearing wounds full of worms, Uncle Anghel, the hero of the story, is kept alive by a mentally retarded child, who stops playing with his mates in order to pour a glass of spirit down the throat of this dying person whenever he whistled. With a body crushed by suffering and soaked in alcohol, this main character talks about the moral law within him. Around them, everything is of a terrifying naturalism, but an unusual artistic force, lighted by the authenticity of the confession, turns the negative hero into an almost angelic, pure, and worthy one. The body

is saved by the soul, therefore this text fragment celebrates the supreme truth: “All that I still have to vigorously fight further is my brain . . . It serves me as a lantern in an endless night,” said uncle Anghel before dying. The confrontation with the twists and turns of life and with the divinity ended in this long confession, which in spite of all the miserable details transfigures Uncle Anghel into a “bright hero” (which is an oxymoron in the given context). The face of the hero becomes brilliantly glowing of/from suffering—one of the universal themes of all national literatures.

Literary speaking, there are further similarities between Istrati and his uncle, Anghel, and also additional viewpoints that can be unraveled and are worthy of attention. With the same subtlety he had shown when he chose a Romanian folk ballad¹⁴ as a leitmotif for a literary work, Panait Istrati ‘knew’ very well where the relationship between reality and fiction begins and ends, in other words, he knew that at the origin of any fantasy fiction, within the virtual space of art, a balance between ethics and aesthetics, between dream and reality, should be established. In reality, his uncle Anghel did not have the death of the hero in the drama reserved for him in this short story of the same name. Instead, it was Istrati who had it, because when narrating the attempt to kill uncle Anghel, the writer remembers the moments through which he had passed on 3 January 1923 in Nice, describing precisely the moments of balance between life and death. This uncle of his encapsulates the tutelary character of all his literary art and biography.

In December 1934, Istrati was invited to deliver a speech on the occasion of his fiftieth anniversary. Devastated by illness and suffering, absent from public life, defeated on all levels and lacking any support, Istrati stated that—between his mother’s belief (in God) and his own belief (in humanity)—his soul fumbles “in an obscure darkness.” In a hospital bed, Istrati wrote a confession and asked his good friend, the great Romanian writer Mihail Sadoveanu, to read it to those gathered for the anniversary:

It is not so bad that I am so defeated now, when I look at my life from the brink of a half a century. I consider this defeat as the most vivid document the impenetrable sent to prove to me the ease with which I led my life. For after I was one of the most fervent disciples of the creators of false religions, I became myself one the fierce supporters of false moral, intellectual, and aesthetic values, and for one moment I even approved and glorified violence, believing that desperate people will become better on the day when nothing would prevent them from applying their own justice for themselves. But they are not better, because a new world cannot be made with old people. And my guilt is all the greater, as I have long known that these alleged aspirants to a moral life were in their vast majority as immoral and greedy for earthly values as the old rulers.

That did not prevent me from lying to myself and screaming with all the hungry wolves against the satiated ones. And here is the punishment: on the very day I screamed the truth, that only wolves would rise to the lead of the world, no matter the side of the barricade, the most complete emptiness grasped my soul, and I only found comfort in the words of my simple mother, who said: “My dear, no one else is going to lick your lips when they are bitter but the good God!”

I believed in the possibility that all people should be brothers, and I do not believe it anymore. I then believed in the wonders of technical progress, and today I see that sci-

ence is still a weapon used against the soul. In the end I believed in the benevolent omnipotence of a single man left to be the master of a state, but I saw that masters surround themselves only with servants.

Today there is no room for my thinking at any of the extremes of social action, nor in the middle, where the apologists of all freedoms make human rights a commodity and turn a blind eye on their duties.

Therefore, all the spiritual preparation I have done throughout my entire life, for the moment when my destiny could enable me to be useful to my neighbor, collapses today like a house of cards. Not only do any of today's social orders need no such preparation, but they all consider it dangerous, for all are governed by the same type of person: the one who works only in the sense of his personal interests, betraying his neighbors.

And if the way I understood Beauty and Good is an outdated thought for my time, a thought that cannot be translated into deeds, then what is left of what I put on paper, or rather, of a life that I led in such a way that it could not be useful neither to others nor to me?

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I have never been so lonely and abandoned. And I believed so much in the people's love for each other! Who do I turn to now? Nothing can turn me back to the faith my mother had; yet, deprived of any faith, I feel unable to fight the death of my soul, which fumbles in an obscure darkness.¹⁵

Migrant Literature

WITH THE passing of the decades and the changing of social relations in all countries, with the evolution of technologies and the emergence of a world economy, old truths that were once the axis of a cultural equilibrium became outdated. Their resilience to changes generated debates with many and extremely contradictory answers. Against this fundamental change of scenery, the countries gathered into a single entity, Europe, whose edification was supported by all nations. Within this new context, some of the writers became privileged, taking the forefront of literary discussions due to their change of optics in terms of the new geo-political perimeter, widened on a European or a world scale. Depending on the language in which they wrote and the international circulation of their work, as well as on other contexts involved in creation, their visibility impact contributes substantially to the revaluation of the image of these writers who tackle the phenomenon of globalization.

Panait Istrati wrote his books at a time when the international recognition of an author did not have the significance of the new global relations of today. Each culture was self-sufficient, and the crossing of the Rubicon towards other means of expression, though natural, did not represent a point of interest in itself.

The huge globalizing wave brought into focus a new concept, that of migrant literature,¹⁶ which refers to the editorial appearance of an impressive number of writers with a different origin than that of the nation and language in which they are published, but who, thanks to their work and their integration into the new economic-social-

cultural space, offer some fresh and ineffable identity perspectives, previously unknown, thus fertilizing the literary ground of the country that adopted them.

Panait Istrati is a forerunner of this tendency displayed especially in Anglo-Saxon literature by the large number of immigrants arriving from the Far East. Istrati was a visionary in this respect, too. Globalization has worked after all in favor of Istrati's work. His ideas from the last century are now elements of the cultural mainstream.¹⁷ Istrati can be considered a writer with great resources in the multicultural direction. The world of his heroes is both Romanian and international, his characters, from Dragomir/Stavru and Kyra, from the haiduks to Mikhail Mikhailovich Kazansky (in the novel *Mikhail*), Musa, the Greeks Kir Leonida, Mavromati, and Neranțula belong to the Mediterranean and the Eastern space, a community of souls without racial prejudice and without borders. Since the 1930s, Panait Istrati oscillated between being a French writer and a Romanian storyteller, but he definitely was what could be called today a European writer.

Conclusions

THE TOPICAL world of Istrati's work is as adventurous as the author's life. All the events previously presented here happened during a short lifespan (1884–1935) and they materialized in the avatars mentioned in the first part of our article: Panait Istrati made his debut in French culture and he was rapidly glorified thanks to translations in most European countries. Istrati returned then to his country, Romania, being received with literary honors only by some writers, those gathered around the *Viata românească* (Romanian Life) literary journal and other publications he had collaborated with before leaving Romania. Literary histories ignored him, or, perhaps worse, made him and his work a mere case of literary exoticism. The fact that his work was banned or silently overlooked could not divert Istrati's destiny from its path. Some biographical episodes brought him a “good” negative publicity, in today's terms, with an effect contrary to what was expected by the permanent aggressors of his memory. In his case, the apophthegm “no one is a prophet in his own country” received a new kind of certification. More than three quarters of a century after he left this world, his work continues to fascinate and to attract contemporary scholars, thanks to its “actuality” and, at the same time, its identity and universality facets. Three aspects governed his fate—the language in which he wrote some of his books, their subject matter, and their autobiographical content. Istrati is today as well known in Europe as in Romania. The oscillation mentioned before received a new name, that of migrant literature, a concept in which he prophetically fit into. □

(Translated from Romanian by CECILIA VĂRLAN)

Notes

1. *Le Petit Niçois*, apud Panait Istrati, *Cum am devenit scriitor*, a reconstruction based on autobiographical texts, selected, translated, and annotated by Alexandru Talex (Craiova: Scrisul Românesc, 1981), 282. The attempts to get in touch with Romain Rolland dated back to January 1919, when the French writer was in a hotel in the Swiss town of Interlaken. His letter was returned with the comment: “Recipient left, no forwarding address.” Romain Rolland did receive a letter from Panait Istrati, though it was not the one found in his pocket as he was dying after attempting suicide, as the legend said, but a letter dated 1919 which was in the possession of the journalist Fernand Desprès from *L’Humanité*. (Romain Rolland confirmed it: “Fernand Desprès gave me your letter from two years ago.”) After the terrible incident, Desprès also sent Romain Rolland a few accompanying lines, in which he suggested that the author of the letter is a “Gorky of the Balkans.” Although it belongs to Desprès, this phrase was circulated by Romain Rolland, who used it as a title of an article he wrote in the *Europe* journal (15 August 1923) on the occasion of Istrati’s debut with the short story “Kyra Kyralina.”
2. Panait Istrati’s writings have been published since the third decade of the last century in France, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Denmark, Switzerland, Finland, Germany, Greece, Spain, Italy, Great Britain, Serbia, Norway, Poland, Holland, Portugal, Sweden, Turkey, Hungary, and the former USSR. His presence can also be reported in countries on other continents: Japan, China (in Asia), Argentina (in South America), Cuba (in Central America), or the United States (in North America).
3. The last text written by Panait Istrati was a short preface to the French translation of Orwell’s book *La vache enragée* (*Down and Out in Paris and London*), translated into Romanian as *Fără un sfanț, prin Paris și prin Londra* (Iași: Polirom, 2017). To a great extent, Orwell’s biography resembles that of Istrati, and his books *Animal Farm* and *1984* fed from the moralizing substance of the volume *Confession for the Defeated* (1929).
4. Édouard Raydon, *Panait Istrati, vagabond de génie*, foreword by Joseph Kessel (Paris: Les Éditions Municipales, 1968).
5. Panait Istrati, *Le pèlerin du cœur*, ed. Alexandru Talex (Paris: Gallimard, 1984). The list of his European friends is impressive and if we should reproduce it, the risk of leaving out some of them is very high. To pick a few, it can be said that he enjoyed the friendship of Romain Rolland, Joseph Kessel, François Mauriac, Mihail Sadoveanu, G. Topârceanu, Gala Galaction, Ernst Bendz, Jean-Richard Bloch, Georg Brandes, Marcel Brion, François-Jean Desthieux, Maurice Martin du Gard, Maxim Gorky, Vicente Blasco Ibañez, Josué Jéhoua, A. M. de Jong, Hubert Juin, Nikos Kazantzakis, Frédéric Lefèvre, Anders Österling, Magdeleine Paz, Jean Prévost, Jacques Robertfrance, Gilbert Sigaux, G. Sandomirsky, Boris Pilnyak, Victor Serge, André Stil, and Adriano Tilgher. Henri Barbusse, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Ilya Ehrenburg, Béla Illés, and Leonid Leonov were also his friends for brief periods of time.
6. Mircea Iorgulescu, *Spre alt Istrati* (Bucharest: Minerva, 1986), 75. The author has rewritten his monograph under the titles *Celălalt Istrati* (Iași: Polirom, 2004), *Panait Istrati* (Paris: Oxus Éditions, 2004), and *Panait Istrati nomadul statornic: Viața, opera, aventurile—legende și adevăruri* (Ploiești: Karta Graphic, 2011).
7. See Eugen Simion, “Identitatea românească,” *Caiete critice* (Bucharest), new ser., 22, 6 and 7 (2011): 3–9; 3–11, <http://caietecritice.fnsa.ro/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/6-2011.pdf>.
8. “Although Panait Istrati also produced Romanian versions of his French work, he will never be a Romanian writer, because these versions lack spontaneity and are deprived of all those literal translations of idioms which had an exotic effect in the French version.” G. Călinescu,

- Istoria literaturii române de la origini până în prezent* (Bucharest: Fundația Regală pentru Literatură și Artă, 1941).
9. Monique Jutrin-Klener, *Panaît Istrati, un chardon déraciné: Écrivain français, conteur roumain* (Paris: F. Maspero, 1970).
 10. From the Preface to *Trecut și viitor: Pagini auto-biografice* (Bucharest: Renașterea, 1925), 5.
 11. The two “helping hands” were Jean-Richard Bloch, who mostly did the revision of the texts written by Istrati directly in French and Jacques Robertfrance. “I owe to Jean-Richard Bloch his ability to understand my French, which he entirely preserved as such,” asserted Panaît Istrati in honesty. The revision proceeding was so important and necessary, that even today this tradition is kept by the great publishing houses in France. The accuracy, faultlessness, and the elegance typical of the French language are certified by the so-called “normalists,” who are graduates of the *École normale supérieure*.
 12. Daniel Léroult, “Panaît Istrati: À propos d’une récente acquisition de la Bibliothèque Nationale,” *Revue de la Bibliothèque Nationale* 19 (1986): 27. See also Panaît Istrati, *Le vagabond du monde*, ed. Daniel Léroult (Paris: Plein Chant, 1991).
 13. Panaît Istrati, *Artele și umanitatea de azi*, transl., preface by Alexandru Tălex (Bucharest: Cruciada Românilor, 1936), 1.
 14. A very important fact must be mentioned here, namely that Istrati took over a ballad of Romanian folklore, “Kyra Kyralina,” which had been previously published in G. Dem. Theodorescu, *Balade tradiționale românești* (1885). He then artistically processed it—we are not afraid to say it—in an exceptional way. Equally remarkable was also the intuition of this autodidact writer, who fully understood the challenging literary value of this ballad, which had been presumably sung at parties in Kyra’s town, where he must have heard it and later read it. Istrati’s novel was initially published in the journal *Europe* (1923) and in book format a year later. Istrati’s idea inspired Mihail Sadoveanu, who in 1929 published *Baltagul*, which can also be considered a continuation of the “Miorița” ballad, previously published in the collection of Vasile Alecsandri (1852).
 15. Excerpt from *Credința* (Bucharest), 24 December 1934, p. 6.
 16. Eugen Simion, “La littérature migrante,” *Caiete critice*, new ser., 22, 3 and 4 (2011): 3–7; 3–9, <http://caietecritice.fnsa.ro/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/3-2011.pdf>; <http://caietecritice.fnsa.ro/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/4-2011.pdf>.
 17. The journal *Caiete critice* hosted in his editions mentioned in n. 16 the papers of the Colloquium “The Romanian Migrant Literature,” organized by the University of Calabria (Italy, prof. Gisele Vanhese) in co-operation with G. Călinescu Institute of the Romanian Academy. We list here the contributions in no. 4: Lucian Chișu, “Panaît Istrati and His Posterity in European Dictionaries” (pp. 11–21); Constantin Frosin, “Quand *Je* devient un *Autre* (Sur la littérature de la migration)” (pp. 22–26); Anna Carmen Sorrenti, “La représentation de l’espace dans *Oncle Anghel*, de Panaît Istrati” (pp. 27–39); Yannik Preumont, “Panaît Istrati et la traduction de la poétique de l’éclatement et de la dispersion” (pp. 40–45); Chantal Chevalier-Chambet, “Panaît Istrati témoin de l’Histoire: Vers l’autre flammé” (pp. 46–51), <http://caietecritice.fnsa.ro/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/4-2011.pdf>.

Abstract

Identity and Universality in the Work of Panait Istrati

The present article highlights the interpretation of Panait Istrati's (1884–1935) literary work from a double perspective: its identity and its universality. Pointing out the fact that the writer's life and work represent a special case, where the hazard intervened decisively, the following aspects defining Panait Istrati's work and destiny shall be presented and discussed in connection with the concepts of identity and universality: Panait Istrati's literary status (considered to be a French writer, but only a Romanian storyteller), the opportunity he had of making his literary debut in a language and a culture of great circulation, the Romanian themes and motifs, his style and, last but not least, the cultural impact which brings him back into actuality and proves him as a visionary writer, whose great achievements are better known in the European cultural space than in his native country.

Keywords

Panait Istrati, Europe, style, universality, French literature, themes, identity, Romanian literature