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**THE CRITICAL RECEPTION OF JOHN  
STEINBECK’S NOVELS IN ROMANIA**

**- PhD Thesis Abstract -**

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This doctoral dissertation explores John Steinbeck's literary fortunes in the Romanian cultural space by examining the critics' response (Chapter II), and the Romanian translations from the American author (Chapters III, IV), while also providing an overview of his critical reputation in the United States (Chapter I). The novelty of this thesis, outlined in the introductory section, lies in the interdisciplinary approach adopted in our attempt to convey a most comprehensive picture of this reception process. Thus, by integrating and harmonizing different directions in the fields of reader-response criticism, translation studies, reception studies, literary theory and criticism, we have managed to develop a theoretical framework that allows for a better understanding of John Steinbeck's critical reception in Romania.

This interdisciplinary perspective has enabled us to view interpretation as the task of the *professional readers* – writers, literary critics, university professors, reviewers –, and to include translators in the same category (cf. Roman Jakobson, Paul Ricoeur). Furthermore, the recent orientations in reader-response criticism and reception studies highlight the role of the reader in activating the meaning of the text, as well as the shifting nature of the “horizons of expectations,” thus facilitating the understanding of different factors that have a bearing on the reading and reception process. The current focus on “text in context” has determined us to view interpretation as taking place in particular socio-cultural and historical contexts (cf. Hans Robert Jauss, Wolfgang Iser, Stanley Fish, James Machor, Robert Scholes, etc.), being governed by specific “horizons of expectations” (Hans Robert

Jauss), conventions (Steven Mailloux), and norms (Gideon Toury, Itamar Even-Zohar). The professional readers' responses to Steinbeck's work are regarded as reactions of particular "interpretive communities," sharing the same interpretive strategies (Stanley Fish), and the critics' and translators' interpretations are also a reflection of a particular historical setting and of specific political conditions (Daniel Cotton). At the same time, throughout our analysis, we have highlighted the importance of authorial intent to translation (cf. Christiane Nord), as well as the manner in which the professional readers' subjectivity is involved in text interpretation (Michael Steig, Umberto Eco).

On the one hand, the deductive approach has allowed us to start from this theoretical framework, consisting of various orientations from the fields of literary theory and criticism, as well as translation studies, and apply them to the corpus of critical references on Steinbeck (Chapters I, II), and to the corpus of the Romanian translations from his work (Chapters III, IV). On the other hand, the critical texts and the translations are tackled inductively, through analysis, description and generalization. Additionally, our research blends quantitative and qualitative methods. Thus we have provided statistics on the number of translations and critical texts about Steinbeck in different historical periods, as well as interpretations of these findings. Moreover, an important contribution consists in the assessment of the Romanian translations of Steinbeck's novels.

The first chapter (*The Critical Reception of John Steinbeck's Work in the United States*) looks at Steinbeck's critical reputation in his home country. Since we are mainly interested in the books that have been translated (or debated)

in Romania, we have focused on the US critics' reactions to these writings, seeking to trace similarities or point out differences in the response offered by American and Romanian professional readers. The chapter is structured along chronological lines, and consists of three sections that deal with the following historical intervals: *The 1930s and the 1940s*, *The 1950s and the 1960s*, and *The Last Decades of Critical Inquiries*.

In tracing the critical response to Steinbeck in his home country, several images of the writer detach themselves. Thus, his first three novels gained him some popularity and led to his categorization as romantic, mythic, mystic and humorist. His next works – *In Dubious Battle*, *Of Mice and Men*, and *The Grapes of Wrath* – attracted a significant amount of critical attention and praise in the 1930s. The labor trilogy made Steinbeck a “household name”, and he became known as a writer of social concern. In fact, the aesthetic merits of this body of fiction were not as debated as the social message delivered by Steinbeck, whose work was attached to realism and naturalism. Prominent US critics (Edmund Wilson, Maxwell Geismar) also pointed to Steinbeck's preoccupation with biology, and the role it is assigned in his fiction, denouncing him at the same time for excessive sentimentality. Steinbeck's post *Grapes* writings caused surprise and often disappointment as the writer turned away from the contemporary scene, seeking to experiment with new techniques and subject matters. With the rise of the New Criticism in the 1940s the preoccupation with the political and social content in his work diminished. The attention shifted to the close scrutiny of Steinbeck's texts, and this appears to have enhanced the writer's critical reputation, as his texts held

up well upon this close analysis, displaying a rich texture and a complexity of theme and point of view. Nonetheless, the first generation of Steinbeck critics – Peter Lisca, Joseph Fontenrose, Warren French, Lester Marks – almost unanimously devalued his post-war novels, arguing that the writer’s decline had begun after *The Grapes of Wrath*. Actually, Steinbeck’s aesthetic experiments were not particularly welcomed by some Romanian critics from the communist period either. As New Criticism made space for other critical and theoretical paradigms, the novelist’s works started to be reconsidered in the US at the start of the 1970s by a second (Tetsumaro Hayashi, Richard Astro, Howard Levant, Jackson J. Benson), and by a third generation of critics (Susan Shillinglaw, Michael Meyer, Mimi Reisel Gladstein, Stephen K. George), whose modern interpretive methods allowed for a more in-depth understanding of the complexity of his oeuvre. Since the 1980s, due to the growing interest in travel literature, the critics’ attentions also focused on Steinbeck’s nonfiction. Moreover, in the past decades, many scholars, such as Robert DeMott or John Ditsky, applied contemporary critical methods to a writer increasingly regarded as postmodernist. New schools have made solid contributions to Steinbeck criticism, and many of his writings have been gaining recognition from the perspectives of feminist and cultural studies.

On the other hand, by examining the ways in which Steinbeck was critically “read” in the US, we could establish the extent to which the Romanian critics’ texts have been informed by American criticism. Thus, we have revealed that many of the comments of the first generation of Steinbeck scholars surface in the Romanian criticism from both the

communist and post-communist years. The comparative examination of the critical response from the two cultural spaces has allowed us to provide a comprehensive picture regarding the impact of the American critical views on the Romanian professional readers. The identification of such influences enables a more precise way of highlighting the Romanian critics' contribution to the reception process, far from reducing the particularities of the Steinbeck's reception in our country.

The second chapter of this thesis (*John Steinbeck in Romania*) traces the responses of the Romanian critics (II.1.) and novelists (II.2.) to Steinbeck's work. The first subchapter, dealing with the critical reception, is divided into two historical periods – communism and post-communism –, each accommodating significant changes in the literary, cultural, and ideological codes. Aiming at a better understanding of Steinbeck's literary fortunes in Romania (mainly in the communist period), we have also made reference to the Eastern European critical reception. In this particular cultural space, the predominantly positive response to Steinbeck, who was generally regarded as a writer with leftist views, reveals the impact of the ideological factor in the selection and criticism of literary works. Thus, in investigating Steinbeck's reception in the communist period, we have tried to show how the similar political circumstances in these countries accounted for similar responses to the American novelist.

Steinbeck was first introduced to the Romanian readership in 1944 via an editors' foreword to Felix Aderca's translation of the novel *The Moon Is Down* (*Nopti fără lună*). However, in this interval, the critical interest in Steinbeck was sparse, and somehow in contrast with the relatively high

number of Romanian translations from his 1930s books, and their popularity among the reading public. The image of the novelist, as projected by the interpretive community of the first communist decade (late 1950s), which was mostly informed by Soviet criticism, was that of a militant and humanist writer (Alf Adania, Mircea Zaciu, Sorin Titel). Also, the survey of the first two reception intervals in the communist period has shown that the presentation of the writer's work was tendentious. Thus, most of the critics debated only those aspects that were convenient to the communist ideology, such as the theme of social injustice and protest against capitalism. Consequently, the critical discourse of the time "manipulated" the readers through oversimplification, projecting an incomplete image of the American writer's work.

A turning point in Steinbeck's critical reception in Romania was registered only in the third reception interval (1963). In the wake of the relative political and cultural thaw from the 1960s, there was a gradual shift in critical focus to the aesthetic value of his works. Still, even under such circumstances, some critics continued to resort to dogmatic clichés in their texts on Steinbeck, labeling him a critical realist, and denouncing the lack of solutions in his work (Eugen B. Marian, Alexandra Sidorovici, Alfred Heinrich). What seems to have actually been expected of Steinbeck was an explicit affiliation to the communist doctrine and an acclaim of the superiority of communism. However, this never happened because the writer did not see in communism a solution to the problems faced by the US. As numerous critics (Warren French, James Gray, Harold Bloom) remarked, Steinbeck's place in the history of American

literature is not next to the communist ideology. In fact, the writer appears to have actually adopted the formula of the New Deal, proffering a form of social solidarity in the spirit of American tradition.

The Romanian critics' interest in Steinbeck remained constant in the years that followed, and the interpretive communities of the late 1960s and of the 1970s-1980s prove to have distanced themselves from the previous ones, for which the Marxist interpretive grid was the main critical approach to the American author's texts. Although a continuation may be traced in the novelist's portrayal as a romantic realist, an optimist, and a humanist, there is more insight into his vision, technique, style, and storytelling art (Stelian Țurlea, Frida Papadache, Gheorghiu Dumitriu, Virgil Stanciu, Nicolae Balotă).

The second period of the American novelist's critical reception corresponds to the post-communist and post-modernist age. Its unprecedented dynamism has allowed us to speak of the reassessment of Steinbeck's oeuvre, which has largely depended on the publication of new translations, the retranslation of already canonical Romanian versions, as well as on the critics' insightful readings. This new dialogue with Steinbeck's work should also be regarded as the result of the shift in focus on long-neglected works, the influence of new directions in literary criticism in general, and of the Romanian critics' wider access to the international bibliography on the American author. Steinbeck's image was thus shaped by numerous interpretations over the seven decades of critical reception in Romania, and has been conditioned by a complex network of historical, ideological, cultural and literary factors.

Subchapter II.2. examines a special kind of response to Steinbeck's work, coming from the Romanian writer Marin Preda in the volume of short stories *Întâlnirea din pământuri* [The Encounter in the Fields]. Thus, we have sought to retrace John Steinbeck's impact on Marin Preda both through an examination of the critical references that testify to it, and a comparative study of relevant passages from their works (*Of Mice and Men*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, and *The Encounter in the Fields*). Our analysis has revealed that both writers focused on a precise presentation of events, and a minute description of behavior, heavily relying on dialogue as a means of character delineation and plot advancement. Besides the common behaviorist traits, Steinbeck's non-teleological view appears to have made its way into Preda's work too. Additionally, both Steinbeck and Preda addressed current social issues, disclosed an intimate knowledge of the way of life of the ordinary people, and chose to render the spoken language of their characters.

Chapter III - *John Steinbeck in Romanian* - is divided into two sections: *Romanian Translations. An Overview*, and *John Steinbeck's Romanian Translators*. First, drawing on the cultural and descriptive orientations in translation studies (Gideon Toury, Itamar Even-Zohar, André Lefevere), we have integrated the translations from Steinbeck with the dominant translation policies in pre-communist, communist, and post-communist Romania.

The in-depth investigation of the context of production of the Romanian translations in the pre-communist period discloses traces of censorial interference. For instance, in the 1942 translation of the novel *The Grapes of Wrath*, all the passages in which Steinbeck's characters speak of

rebellion, or in which the bank is described as a monster, are omitted. At the same time, the translators' options were governed by often contradictory translation norms. Thus, in the pre-communist period, the commercial criteria imposed by the private publishing houses strongly impacted on the translation activity. To be more exact, for this period we identified a number of decisive factors guiding the production of the translations from Steinbeck, such as the market-oriented criteria for selection, the translators' affinities with particular authors, and the high threshold of tolerance in the Romanian culture, which allowed for indirect translations via French (in Steinbeck's case, the novel *The Moon Is Down* was translated into Romanian from the French intermediary version *Nuits sans lune*).

In the communist period, there is an obvious shift in quality compared to the previous years. Due to the translation campaign initiated by the state, the status of translations no longer suffered from devaluation. However, the state as the main "patronage" source in communist Romania strictly regulated the translation and publishing activities by means of very efficient censorship bodies. Thus, the ideological factor played a pivotal part in the selection for translation of some of Steinbeck's texts, such as *In Dubious Battle* or *The Grapes of Wrath*. Still, the constant publication of translations from Steinbeck from the late 1950s to the early 1980s proves that they were not perceived as a threat to the communist regime. Furthermore, they were often used for propaganda purposes. In fact, many of the foreign literary works that got past the censorship had somehow to legitimize an official meta-narrative. This is obvious in several critical reviews of Steinbeck's books, in which he was labeled a militant writer,

who exposed the ills of the capitalist system. On the other hand, even the novels that do not carry any political and ideological overtones were transposed into Romanian since they did not run counter to the communist canons.

In Romania, most of Steinbeck's works were made available to the readership in the communist decades (23 titles), and the quality of the reception was ensured both by the high standards of the Romanian versions, written by professional translators, and by the metatexts – prefaces, critical studies – that accompanied them. On the other hand, the post-communist period also witnessed the publication of a significant number of (re)translations from Steinbeck (11 titles). Although norms are hybrid and translation standards have started to be market-governed, they have not ceased to be quality-driven either. Apart from reprints, the publishing houses also promoted a number of books that have been unavailable to the Romanian readers in the previous reception periods: *The Pearl*, *Cannery Row*, *The Short Reign of Pippin IV: A Fabrication*, *A Russian Journal*, *To a God Unknown*.

In our attempt to give due consideration to the authors of the translations, in subchapter III.2., we have provided information about the socio-professional and cultural background of the Romanian translators of Steinbeck's novels: Felix Aderca, Eugen and Paul B. Marian, Silvian Iosifescu, S. Sanin, Dumitru Mazilu, Tatiana Malița and Mihaela Dragomir, Frida Papadache, Any Florea and Virgil Florea, Veronica Focșeneanu, Radu Paraschivescu and Octavian Roske. This information, related to the concept of *habitus* proposed by Bourdieu, is relevant in justifying the translators' options and the assessment of the translations.

Since the quality of an author's work in translation

influences the critical reception, the evaluation of the translations has been a necessary enterprise for the investigation of the response to the American author in Romania. Thus, Chapter IV (*Translations of John Steinbeck's Novels. A Critical Perspective*) examines the corpus of Romanian translations from Steinbeck. Given the volume and variety of his work, our research has focused on the 22 translations of his novels, to which we have applied the functionalist model set forth by Christiane Nord.

Additionally, throughout this chapter, we have attempted to identify certain translational norms peculiar to different historical periods. For instance, the contrastive analysis of the source and target texts has revealed that, in the 1940s, most translators complied with the translation norm that foresaw producing accessible and aesthetically enjoyable target texts for the Romanian readership, which meant removing the passages containing vulgar or offensive language. Thus, the often unadulterated language in Steinbeck's novels was neutralized by the translators themselves in the Romanian versions.

In the communist period, most of the texts translated in the 1940s were *rewritten* (cf. Lefevere's terminology) to suit a different ideology and vision of literature. Due to the initiation of a massive translation campaign by the Romanian state, the quality of the translations from Steinbeck significantly improved beginning with the late 1950s. Still, although the predominant orientation was towards the source text (and culture), the norm of fluency continued to prevail. Actually, the Romanian versions of Steinbeck's texts issued in the communist period (Dumitru Mazilu's translation of *The Grapes of Wrath*, or Frida Papadache's version of *Of Mice*

*and Men*) are evidence of the translators' concern with striking a balance between Steinbeck's originality and the Romanian cultural, literary and textual conventions. Unlike in the first translations, the characters' 'colorful' language is successfully translated by Dumitru Mazilu and Frida Papadache, who used a general colloquial language to render the dialect in the original texts. The norms and strategies followed by the translators in the post-communist years are not very different from those of the previous period, and the model proposed by Christiane Nord (1991) allowed us to evaluate the Romanian versions from a broader and more objective perspective.

To conclude, we hope that the contribution of this thesis lies, on the one hand, in its documentary value, as it traces both the Romanian and the American critical response to John Steinbeck. On the other hand, a significant contribution lies in the novelty of approaching the reception process, as well as in the thorough evaluation of the translations, a fact entirely justified by their importance and value.