Teaching American Literature in Romania: Emerson and "Self-Reliance"
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Abstract: This article is based on the author's experience teaching American literature in Romania on a U.S. Fulbright Grant. This experience allowed the author to rethink his view of American literature in general, and his teaching of Ralph Waldo Emerson in particular. Emerson's work was embraced by the students, although not due to any specific pro-American sentiment. Instead, the students appeared to find in it an articulation of self-definition that reflects the current movement of the country from its post-Communist past into its burgeoning capitalist present.

In her book Where is American Literature?, Caroline F. Levander argues that when we examine how American literature is received abroad, "We come to see an American literary tradition that is as much about threatening national truisms and disrupting master narratives of U.S. hegemony as about facilitating the development of those narratives" (80). She goes on, "We see, for example, that American literature never exists as pure, unadulterated form, but is always refracted, diluted, and dispersed through the perspectives of its world neighbors." Levander thus deconstructs the very notion of American literature as a self-contained and self-assembled unit and instead demonstrates how and where American literature is read has a tremendous impact on what, precisely, American literature is perceived to be. One is reminded of the Reader Response idea of "interpretive communities" and their role to play in how texts are understood, although that concept doesn't play an explicit role in Levander's formulation.¹ Nevertheless, I was influenced by this book's insights when I applied for, and was awarded, a Fulbright Grant in American Studies to teach at Universitatea Babeş-Bolyai (UBB) in Cluj-Napoca, Romania. My interest was in examining what it means to teach American literature in a former Warsaw Pact country.

I spent the spring of 2018 in Romania and took every opportunity to query my colleagues and students about how they viewed their nation's past. When speaking with older

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¹ Stanley Fish memorably describes the concept thus: “Interpretive communities are made up of those who share interpretive strategies not for reading (in the conventional sense) but for writing texts, for constituting their properties and assigning their intentions. In other words these strategies exist prior to the act of reading and therefore determine the shape of what is read rather than, as is usually assumed, the other way around” (483). In the present essay, I suggest that the particular “interpretative community” I taught in Romania brought to their reading of Emerson not a desire to see him as reflective of American ideology but instead as a figure expressing a notion of self-definition that is integral to their aspirations in their post-Communist society.
colleagues (those in their mid-50s and older), I found some fondly remembered the early years of Communism, citing the sense of social security offered by the country's new political direction, which promised fair and even distribution of resources. Colleagues who were closer to my own age (mid-40s) tended to recall the lack of consumer goods, although some items were popular on the black market, such as American movies on VHS tapes. The 80s in particular was a time of want as Romania's long-term leader, Nicolae Ceaușescu, was determined to pay off the national debt. Consequently, basic resources, such as heat in buildings, were limited. Contrasted with these other groups, the specific demographic I was teaching (young people, mostly women, of traditional college age) was largely indifferent when asked about the Communist period. Some students spoke of how their grandparents were nostalgic for the past, but the students themselves generally had little interest in this period of the country's history except that they perceived their nation as behind their Western European peers as a consequence of Communism.

Yet, one is struck by how Romania's Communist past clashes with its aspiring-capitalist present when traveling around the country today. Physical evidence of the Romania's not-so-distant past abounds, for example, in the form of "commieblock" apartments remaining from the Communist period. Many people continue to live in these austere, concrete structures, as did I during my time there. Interestingly, these buildings are often bedecked with advertisements for businesses and companies, including American ones such as Pepsi, as I found when I visited Bucharest in February of that year. The nation's largest city was also canvassed with billboards promoting the new release of Marvel's *Black Panther* (2018) film. American cable channels, subtitled in Romanian, run on TV. Perhaps needless to say, then, Romanians generally, and young people in particular, are steady consumers of American popular culture and social media. During the time I was there, for example, students talked about controversial comments tweeted by Kanye West.  

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2 One colleague told me an amusing story of how Romanian school children would “tell” each other Western movies they had watched on pirated VHS tapes in the 80s. These students would be a celebrity for the day as other children listened in rapt attention to recounting of plots of popular films. As many of these movies were American, they help to underscore the point that in some fundamental ways, American media, including literature, remained exotic in Romania in the 80s.

To be sure, Romania's relationship with the U.S. has been complicated. Among the Warsaw Pact countries, it was less dogmatic than some others. Romania's refusal to go along with its peers in the invasion of Czechoslovakia, in addition to Ceaușescu's encouragement of political debate during his rise to power in 1968, suggested the country could be individually-minded (Fitcher). These developments seemed to signal that there could be inroads made between the U.S. and Romania. Yet restrictions arose as the next decade began, particularly as American culture seeped into Romanian everyday life (Perry 148). To Ceaușescu's chagrin, Romanians would clandestinely listen to the forbidden Radio Free Europe, which provided listeners access to American news and music (Cummings). One of my Romanian colleagues underscored how important this resource was for some of her countrymen and women. In an ill-fated attempt to show Romanians the extent of American material decadence, Ceaușescu allowed the American tv show Dallas to run in the 80s. Rather than reject the materialist excesses depicted in Dallas, however, Romanians became enamored of the show and it highlighted the relative disparity between their lives and those in the West. This misstep of Ceaușescu's has been credited with helping along the 1989 revolution that culminated in his execution (Welch).

Given this complicated social context, I was eager to learn what it might mean to be an American teaching American literature in this fascinating post-Communist country. As one often finds in many European universities, the English faculty at UBB speak and write in British English. Correspondingly, the department offers no American Literature track for English majors; the curriculum focuses on British literature, with an option for Irish Studies. One of the courses I taught was an elective titled American Culture and Civilization. Given my background as a student of American literature, I thought it best to teach American culture and history through the prism of literature. Despite being an elective, the course saw an enrollment of a little over 80 students, which suggested a high level of interest among the students for the material. The students were used to a formal lecture style of pedagogy to which I adapted, although I still tried to generate some discussion, as is common in student-centered American classrooms. The students were somewhat hesitant to speak up at first, but as the weeks went by the dialogue became more natural and flowing.

Although students were steady consumers of American culture, they knew little American history or literature. Staples of American classrooms, such as Dickinson, Faulkner,
or Hughes were totally new to them, so I endeavored to teach the class as a survey, starting with Bradstreet and ending with Morrison. Many items of knowledge that might be taken for granted when teaching these materials to American students—such as the early origins of the nation; the history of slavery and the longstanding problem of institutional racism; or themes such as American "rugged individualism"—needed to be explained at some length. This experience forced me to reconsider what was most important to understanding American literature. It reaffirmed for me the importance of embracing the diversity inherent in the nation's literature, especially by emphasizing historically marginalized voices, such as those of women and writers of color.

While the students enjoyed these readings, particularly the poems of Langston Hughes and the stories by Kate Chopin ("Désirée's Baby") and Charlotte Perkins Gilman ("The Yellow Wall-Paper"), I want to focus here on the reading that appeared to move the students the most: Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Self-Reliance." I should note that students at UBB are given a bibliography of readings at the beginning of each course. No readings are supplied, nor is there a bookstore where items can be purchased. Students are expected to source their own readings, which seems foreign to those of us who are used to the U.S. practice of making readings readily available. In attempt to make things easier for students for whom English is a second language, I prepared a blog where I posted links to the readings. In preparation for our discussion of Emerson, students read "Self-Reliance" and excerpts from Walden by Henry David Thoreau as well as his "Resistance to Civil Government." In class I shared information with students about Transcendentalism, such as its connection to American Romanticism and the influence of Eastern philosophies. In order to understand the theological approach that informed Emerson's early development, we also discussed Unitarianism. Doing so offered the added benefit of connecting the readings to the region in which the university is located: Transylvania, which is credited as being one of the locations where Unitarianism was developed. Overall, I stressed Emerson's place of prominence among American thinkers and essayists.

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4 Thomas Amherst Perry's history of American literature in Romania points out that readers in Romania have had access to Emerson for some time, but other American writers have proven more popular, such as James Fenimore Cooper and Harriet Beecher Stowe (175-177).
After reviewing the background information, the class looked at some of the best known passages of "Self-Reliance," such as Emerson's argument that one must become an individual thinker. He writes, "There is a time in every man's education when he arrives at the conviction that envy is ignorance; that imitation is suicide; that he must take himself for better, for worse, as his portion." This conviction in avoiding imitation leads directly to perhaps Emerson's most succinct instruction: "Trust thyself." In my teaching of American literature survey courses over the years, I have found that this line usually resonates with students in its elegant simplicity. It encapsulates a whole worldview: one will always be questioned and challenged; the path forward is never easy. One must necessarily have faith in one's own resolve. I once taught a student who adored the phrase so much that he decided to get it tattooed on himself.

The class discussed the barrier to one's development that Emerson finds in society generally. We examined the following passage, "Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members. Society is a joint-stock company, in which the members agree, for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and culture of the eater." Emerson gets at the heart of social compromise here. One must sacrifice "liberty" for the common good and to ensure each individual's security. Despite these benefits, there is an undesirable consequence in this exchange, and one must fight to retain some of his or herself in a society that seeks to homogenize its members. Emerson follows up with a succinct formulation: "Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist." Emerson's gender-biased language notwithstanding, the point is clear: if one is to become a fully individuated person, one must necessarily go against the grain of conventional thinking and acting. It's not difficult to imagine how college students in general would respond positively to this advice as they face challenges while finding their way in the world. The advice is even more profound in the case of Romanian young people who hope to see their country emerge from its past to be a vital member of the world community.

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5 In her book Sons and Daughters of Self-made Men, Mary Paniccia Carden critiques the notion of the "self-made man" that punctuates American literary discourse. With regard to this specific passage by Emerson, she notes, "we come into self-aware existence within relationships and learn to negotiate the world, how to be human, exactly by imitating others. Emerson's prohibition on imitation pushes selfhood into complete, impossible separation" (32-33).
Emerson's advice takes on a spiritual complexion when he declares, "Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind." I had assumed students might be resistant to, or at least more critical of, these ideologies of the individual. In the U.S., students typically have little trouble embracing the notion that they need to be themselves and that they should focus on their desires and goals chiefly. I was unsure if this would be the case with Romanian students who haven't been inculcated with the ideology of personal freedom that's common in the U.S. Somewhat surprisingly, I found the students listening with rapt attention, slowly nodding their heads in agreement as I read these passages aloud. Any lasting effect of Communism's emphasis on the collective rather than the individual did not appear to hamper the students' ability to discover virtue in Emerson's words. I found them to be emboldened by the force of Emerson's argument. Perhaps this should not be too surprising given that most of them would have been born a decade after the 1989 revolution. The country took measures to change its outlook in the years following the revolution. Even the streets in Cluj were renamed.6

Part of the appeal of Emerson's words, I believe, comes in how firm he is in the notion that reinvention of the self is important, perhaps even necessary. He writes,

Why drag about this corpse of your memory, lest you contradict somewhat you have stated in this or that public place? Suppose you should contradict yourself; what then? It seems to be a rule of wisdom never to rely on your memory alone, scarcely even in acts of pure memory, but to bring the past for judgment into the thousand-eyed present, and live ever in a new day.

When I teach these lines in American classrooms, they echo the individualist ideals that the students have been taught since infancy. The American Dream itself is predicated on an ideology of self-definition as one pursues one's economic and social aspirations. For the Romanian students, the lines articulated a self-development that historically has not been

6 Most of the old street signs had been taken down, but I routinely passed by one on my walks through the city. This particular street still displayed its old name (Str. Karl Marx) and its new name (Str. Decebal). Decebal was the last king of the Dacians, who resisted the Roman occupation of what is today the heart of Romania. This juxtaposition of the country’s Communist past and more recent efforts to revisit its deeper origins struck me as a fitting metaphor for where it finds itself today.
part of the thinking of their country but which describes precisely their desire for self-definition in the present. Similarly, Emerson's well known dismissal of consistency spoke to their own need for personal growth:

A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines. With consistency a great soul has simply nothing to do. [...] Speak what you think now in hard words, and to-morrow speak what to-morrow thinks in hard words again, though it contradict everything you said to-day.—"Ah, so you shall be sure to be misunderstood."—Is it so bad, then, to be misunderstood? Pythagoras was misunderstood, and Socrates, and Jesus, and Luther, and Copernicus, and Galileo, and Newton, and every pure and wise spirit that ever took flesh. To be great is to be misunderstood.

Readers are sometimes challenged to follow Emerson's logic in the first half of this passage. Consistency of thought or opinion is usually considered a virtue. A discussion of the second half of the quote—particularly its famous final line—helps students to see that Emerson is getting at the need for unorthodox thinking to help move the world along. When Emerson notes, "Nothing can bring you peace but yourself," students can empathize with the notion that there must be some self-validation to make successful this attempt to grow and find one's true self.

My impression that Emerson was the most impactful reading selection was borne out when students completed the final term paper. The assignment called for an essay of at least 2,000 words that offered a clear argument on one of the course’s primary texts. The choice of text was left to the students. I found that 24% of the papers referenced Emerson or were focused entirely on him. This was a larger percentage than any other reading of the term. Despite the way I had framed Emerson as an essential American thinker, the papers presented Emerson not as a promoter of American individualism but rather as a philosophical figure whose ideas have universal appeal. I was surprised at first. One student, for instance, explicitly positioned Emerson in a line of philosophical inquiry:
The individual conscience is a problem of philosophy that has been concerning humanity since its beginning. From Antiquity to Modern Era, authors like Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Hegel, Sartre and Camus focused on the image of man and the importance of [his] own being. Each person has [his or her] significance and certain rights that are either of divine origin or inherent in human nature. Each individual exists, perceives, experiences, thinks, and acts in and through his own being.

Similarly, another student concluded her paper by noting, "The transcendentalist thoughts expressed in the essay give the readers a guidebook of how a man can be authentic and self-reliant and suggests that this [is] a way to succeed and live a happy life." Yet another student puts it even more bluntly: "In conclusion, a human being should be able to act and think freely in the society he lives, without having to worry about what the rest may think or how they might act." Despite my early surprise at the students’ glossing over of Emerson's American qualities, I came to see that his advocacy of liberation from the views of others would be doubly important in a society where the older generation sometimes entertains nostalgia for a past that is quite different from the country's current trajectory. It makes perfect sense, in other words, that the Romanian students would make Emerson their own.

At the end of the academic year, the students organized their own celebration as well as their own graduation ceremony—another inversion of the way we do things in the States. At the celebration, each professor in the English program was asked to say a few words of advice. When it was my turn, I admitted I wasn't one to give advice often, but that I would share with them the simple advice of one of my countrymen: "Trust thyself." I expected a positive reaction based on what I had seen in class, but I was genuinely surprised when the students actually cheered. If there is something like a shared set of characteristics among all people, Emerson seems to have tapped into at least one important quality: the desire for self-determination. To that we might add the importance of self-validation. In the U.S. we like to think of these as particularly American ideals. The students of Romania taught me that those ideals are far more universal than we might take them to be.
Works Cited


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