

The Romanian-Danish cultural bonds during the 19th century

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Abstract: This article approaches the cultural contacts between the Romanian and Danish peoples during the 19th century. At this epoch the two people started to discover each other. Culture represented an essential factor in their rapprochement. The attraction between their different cultures is proved by the contacts and cooperation between different Romanian and Danish cultural and scientific institutions, the translation of the most significant literary works, study visits of some of the best scholars and the publishing of descriptive books which allowed spreading valuable information about the two countries and their people.

In this article we investigate the establishment and the evolution of the cultural contacts between Romania and Denmark, a country less known to us but one that attracted attention of the Romanian people since very early times. The article displays the elements of attraction between the two cultures and the individuals that initiated the contacts between them. Although separated by a great distance and by culture and civilization, the Romanian and Danish people did not remain unknown to each other. The first written information of Romanians about Denmark are to be found in a translation of a treaty of Geography of Buffier made by Amfilohie Hotiniul in 1795 known as *De obște Gheografie* (V. Gliga, I. Constantin Turcu, A. Vaisman, 1971).

Elements of Danish and Scandinavian culture attracted the attention of the Romanians in very early times. A series of Romanian scholars collected an impressive number of Scandinavian books dating back the Renaissance epoch and several of them can still be found on the shelves of the great Romanian libraries. From this series is taking part the second Latin edition of Saxo Gramaticus' work- *Dania Historia Libris VXi*, Francofurti ad Moenum, 1576 which together with other four works is carrying the stamp of the Sf. Sava College Library. In addition to these, is the book of Arngrimur Jonsson printed in Copenhagen in 1593 entitled *Brevis Commentarius de Islandia* which belonged first to Constantin Hurmuzaki and after to D.A. Sturdza and a description of a collection of zoological, botanical, mineralogical, and chemical oddities belonging to the Danish bookman, Ole Worm. The last was collected by a scholar from Sibiu, named Valentin Franck von Franckenstein (I. Comșa, 1979). In the Teleki Bolyai Library from Târgu Mureș, are conserved "*Regnum Danie* and *Norvegiae Descriptio*".

More are the books dating from the 18th century. Several of them belonged to the collection of Sf. Sava College like the famous satiric novel of Holberg "*The underground trip of Niels Klim*" (1754). From the same time dates back the book of Mallet- *Introduction a l'histoire du Danemark*, Copenhagen, 1755-1756 which has the signature of Alexandru Odobescu along with a German version of the history of Denmark written by Holberg *Danische Reichsistori*, Flensburg und Leipzig, 1757, a collection of writings of mediaeval

Danish scholars edited by Jacob Langebek- *Scriptores Rerum Danicorum Medii Aevii*, Hafnie, 1772 (I. Comşa, 1979). There is no doubt that the presence of these books in the Romanian libraries is not simply accidental but on the contrary, it attracts a revealing conclusion: the early attraction exerted by the Danish culture on the Romanian scholars.

The 19th century was characterized by a mutual discovery of Romania and the Nordic countries, but this discovery was made in a disorderly manner. Connections are converging from so many directions that it would be impossible to establish a strict order of facts. Books on Denmark and the Scandinavian world arrived in a greater number on the Romanian territory beginning with the first half of the 19th century. Now appeared the works *Histoire de la poesie scandinave* of Edelstand du Meril (Paris, 1839) and the Antology *Chants populaires du Nord – Islande, Danemark, Suede, Norvege, Feroe, Finlande* of Xavier Marmier (Paris, 1842).

The Medicins and Naturalists Society from Iaşi established contacts with the Royal Society of Northern Antiquary from Copenhagen. A series of papers edited by the Danish Society were made known to the Romanian public through the reviews written in publications like *Albina Românească* and *Spicuitorul Moldo-Român* (I. Comşa, 1979).

Several Romanian personalities of the time received the status of founder members of the Royal Society of Northern Antiquary as a sign of appreciation for their financial contribution. Among them were Mihai Sturdza (His name is written on the founders list along with the name of other kings and emperors like Nicolae, the kings of Denmark, Prussia, Sardinia and Holland and other important members of the Society), Mihail Kogălniceanu, Doctor Iacob Cihac, Gheorghe Bibescu, bishop Neofit of Ungro-Vlahia, Barbu Ştirbei, Nicolae Mavros and George Bengescu (I. Comşa, 1976). With no doubt the gratitude granted to all these people was due to their significant contribution to the accomplishment of the goals of the Danish Society.

In the last half of the 19th century, knowledge of the Danish literature extended marking in this way a new phase in the evolution of the Danish-Romanian cultural relations. The tales of Andersen and Pontoppidan, the texts of literary critique of Georg Brandes were translated into Romanian.

The Danish people and culture attracted the attention of several Romanian intellectuals of that time. The well known writer Bogdan Petriceicu Haşdeu was among the scholars interested of this culture. He established a series of contacts with the Scandinavian scientific environment. Haşdeu was an expert in Danish history as it can be seen in his article „*The Unification*”. The article was written at the time when a strong campaign was conducted against the unification of the Romanian provinces from 1859. Haşdeu followed the example offered by the Scandinavian writers who launched a great pro-Danish campaign in 1863-1864 when Prussia and Austria attacked Denmark in order to occupy Sleswig and Holstein. Haşdeu offers to his fellow countrymen the example of the Danish people who in spite of the losses suffered did not lose its national spirit: “Another country, which has half the size of ours, did not fear to face two great empires; after a heroic battle she lost the battlefield but not the national hope. Do you know why the Austro-Prussian colossus did not manage do frighten and to destroy the small peace of land called Denmark? Because the patriotism burned in the Danish harts and they taught us to blindly believe in the lucky star of our country as the lover believes in the beauty of his sweetheart” (E. Lozovan, 1965: 292). In order to explain better the feelings of the Danish people, Haşdeu recalls the national anthem of Denmark composed by N.F.S. Grundtvig. To the Danish patriotism, he opposes the weakness and the hunger of power of several Romanians who opposed the Unification of the Romanian principalities at that time.

The Danish people were among those who supported the accomplishment of the national unification of the Romanian people. The activity of the Romanian cultural and

political societies who supported this cause outside the country sensitized a great number of European personalities. One of them was Frederik Bojer, deputy in the Danish Folketing and president of the International Peace Office Commission who expressed its solidarity with the Romanian people. A section of the Cultural League from Anvers broadcasted in Denmark the memoir of the students from 1891. In this way their cause was brought to the attention of the Danish people. The president of the Royal Society of Geography from Copenhagen transmitted to the Romanian students from Bucharest and Iași its support for their scientific activities and for their actions for the prosperity of the nations. "I use this opportunity to ask you to let know all the students from Romania, my live sympathy and to inform them that I will always be at their disposal to help them in order to accomplish all the projects connected with science and the progress of their country" (T. Bujduveanu, 1999: 58) He promised to write to professor Gr. Cobălcescu from Iași whom he knew from different international meetings, in order to assure him about the his favorable attitude towards the Romanian cause.

Hașdeu was the first Romanian linguist who studied the Scandinavian languages. He had a good knowledge of their syntax and in his book *Cuvinte din bătrâni (Words from the old times)* edited in 1879, he demonstrated that the presence of the indefinite nounal article from the Scandinavian languages is due to the Thracian influences transmitted through the Goths as well as to the Scando-Thracian contacts (E. Lozovan, 1965). He even dears to advance the theory of ancient contacts of the Romanian people with the Nordic nations.

Among the great number of Romanians attracted by the culture of the Nordic space, one must mention also the great Romanian poet, Mihai Eminescu. His affinity for the Nordic myths and gods is obvious in his well known poems: *Strigoi, Odin și poetul, Memento mori, Diamantul Nordului*, etc

In addition, it is well known the interest for the Nordic culture of Nicolae Iorga. The attraction for the Danish Literature determined him to study the Danish language as himself declared in one of his writings "*O viață de om, așa cum a fost*": "*I learned Danish from some memoirs from the time of Oehlenschläger*" (ed. 1972, p.193). This fact was well known in the epoch as one can see from one of the letters addressed to Iorga by one of his university colleagues dating from the 26th of January 1892: "Do not write me in Danish because I am not willing to understand or to learn that language" (B. Theodorescu, 1972: 113). The will to study the Danish language was determined also by his interest for the literary critique of Georg Brandes, the famous Danish scholar. Later, being attracted by the Swedish archives and the fame of the University of Uppsala, the Romanian historian visited also the city of Copenhagen, first in 1902 and later in 1926.

For several other Romanian writers and literary critics as Panait Istrati and Constantin Dobrogeanu Gherea, Garabet Ibrăileanu, Lucian Blaga, the writings of Brandes represented real bench-marks in their analysis of literary works. Mihai Ralea asserted that Brandes contributed to the modernization of the Romanian culture through the aperture created in the views of the Romanian literates (G. Șerban, 1979).

At its turn, the Romanian culture awoke a comparable interest among the Danish intellectuality. This fact is proved by the presence in the Danish libraries of a series of publications regarding the Romanian space. Among them there were *Vocabularium Valachicum*, edited by Friderik Temler in 1768, *Ved Nedre Donau*, the travelling log of Frederik Schiern, published in 1861, *Romanske Mozaiker* and *Rumaenien* belonging to Kristoffer Nyrop. A significant collection of Romanian publications was collected by the Institute of Romanic studies from Copenhagen from the donations of famous Danish professors as Nyrop, Brondal and Sandfeld (I. Comșa, 1979).

Among the first Danish travellers in the Romanian Principalities who left written information about the places they visited is the famous Danish writer, Hans Christian Andersen. He sailed along the Danube in 1841 and recorded the impressions from this trip in

a book called *En Digters bazaar (A poet's bazaar)*. The bazaar is a metaphor used by Andersen in order to name the Orient which he crossed travelling through Greece, the Muslim and the Danubian countries. He arrived on the Romanian territory on his way back to Denmark, after a trip through Bosfor and the Black Sea. When arrived in Constanța, the ship he was travelling on met a small and apparently wild coast. Constanța seemed to Andersen a saddening city which did not recover after the 30 years war. The same was Cernavoda which he called "a model of decadent city" (M. Romanescu, 1941: 180-181). Andersen discovered that the Danube was a symmetry axis delimiting the Balkan Peninsula from Central Europe and observed that on the Bulgarian coast were glittering Turkish minarets while on the Romanian shore there were church derricks. Europe started from the grassy Valahia covered with wheat fields.

Although he did not cross the Romanian territory as his boat sailed along the Bulgarian coast of the Danube, Andersen realised it was a space situated at the junction of three empires and that Romania suffered because of this geographical position at the crossroad of these empires. He knew about the Latinity of the Romanians; a simple shepherd from Dobroudgea recalling him a series of Romanian rulers from Valahia. He also had some knowledge about the Romanian folklore. At Orsova he assisted at a Romanian round dance, he listened to pipe music and observed architectural elements of the peasant houses... The beauty of the landscape with green fields and beautiful flowers made him feel like being in Denmark (M. Romanescu, 1941). During his entire journey he was annoyed that all the people who heard about Denmark thought that it was situated somewhere in America. But suddenly he met a Romanian little boy who knew where his country was situated. "I think it is far away from here! he said, close to Hamburg" The words of little Adam Marcu, the only person he talked to, deeply impressed Andersen: "His noble nature, his intelligent and innocent look were the best certificate of nobleness" (M. Romanescu, 1941).

Without having really known Romania, as he only temporarily passed by it, Andersen understood that through culture, intelligence, dignity, longing for modernity, those regions were the first gate to Europe. His recorded impressions and observations regarding Romania helped making Romania known in Denmark and in the entire world. The notes of the Danish writer concerning his trip to Romania were gathered in his book "*A Poet's Bazaar*" (Copenhagen, 1842) and translated into English in 1840 (the book has been translated also into Romanian in 2000 by Grete Tartler, Romania's former ambassador in Denmark). This notes were studied by Marcel Romanescu and used in his work "Andersen in Romania. A trip on the Danube 100 years ago". The Romanian people considered Andersen as a friend granting him its entire sympathy and appreciation. His works were translated and edited in Romania in over 80 titles. The start was made with „*Scăpărătoarea*”, edited in 1886 in Sibiu.

Another Danish name familiar in the Romanian intellectual circles was Kristoffer Nyrop, a Danish philologist interested in Roman languages and literature. Wishing to improve his knowledge of Romanian language, he made a trip to Romania in April 1884. He was only 26 years old but his fiery thirst for knowledge had determined him to go to Paris where he studied philology (G. Tartler, 2003). In Paris he got acquainted with the charm of the Romanian language through the Gaston Paris's courses, the professor of Ovid Densusianu. This awoke his interest for the study of Romanian and the desire to visit Romania. Once arrived in Bucharest, he stepped right into the middle of the Romanian cultural life by meeting several Romanian intellectuals and establishing friendly relations with many of them. These relations have been maintained through a long correspondence until the end of his life in 1931. He knew Th. Rosetti, Vlahuță, Al. C. Balș, Petre Ispirescu, Ion Bianu with whom he will exchange letters for 35 years wishing to be informed on the Romanian realities, Iacob Negruzzi with whom he discussed about the status of the Jews in Romania and about the changing of the Romanian Constitution.

What he enjoyed the most was the meeting of Titu Maiorescu, the mentor of Junimea. We find out more about this in the diary of the latter dating from 2/14 of May 1884: “At dinner I had as guest the bookman Kristoffer Nyrop from Copenhagen who wants to learn Romanian ...” (Serban G., 1979: 11). Nyrop gained the sympathy of Maiorescu who with his usual kindness towards the young studious men, lend him books, invited him to the meetings of Junimea, offered him historical information he needed and verified his notes for an article about the Romanian monarchy.

Right after being returned in Copenhagen, Nyrop send Maiorescu a letter on the 20th of August 1884 expressing his deep gratitude for the welcome he enjoyed in Bucharest. The young Danish linguist expressed his gratitude in a volume of travelling log about Romania and Province, entitled *Romanske mosaiker. Kulturbilleder fra Rumaenien og Provence* (Şerban G., 1979: 289). In this volume he dedicated an entire chapter to the biography of Titu Maiorescu whom he presented as the leader of the spiritual ambitions of modern Romania, the founder of Junimea and its popular lectures, deputy, “*the best speaker in the Chamber*”, devoted minister and advocate. In a letter addressed to Maiorescu, he announced the near publishing of his volume and asked for a photo of Maiorescu that he absolutely wanted to publish in his book (Serban G., 1979: 289). The chapter dedicated to Maiorescu included the summaries of the most significant articles of the Romanian critic together with a translation of the article called “*În contra direcției de astăzi (Against today’s direction)*”.

Nyrop was the first and the last translator in Danish of Maiorescu’s writings and the first who talked about modern Romania in the Scandinavian countries, as himself stated in a letter to Maiorescu from the 7th of April 1885. Later his efforts to make known the Romanian realities in Scandinavia were repaid by Maiorescu. Once he became minister in 1888, he asked for the decoration of the Danish Romanist for his remarkable merits by the Romanian government. In a letter of gratitude for the decoration received, Nyrop announced his intention of continuing his action by writing a book on the Romanian folk poetry which captivated him during his trip to Romania (Şerban G., 1979: 289).

In 1890, in his journey to the North Cape, Maiorescu passed twice through Copenhagen, on the 17th and the 30th of July 1890. On his way back home, he tried to find his old friend at his home on Kongesvej 89, as he mentions in his diary notes. Nyrop’s disappointment is expressed in a letter to Maiorescu on the 15th of August: “You, the eminent, the kind and hospitable gentlemen Maiorescu were in Copenhagen and I did not have at least the pleasure of shaking your hand. I say “at least” because, if I had found you [...] I would’ve use all my language resources in order to convince you to prolong a little bit your stay, to have dinner with me or at Skodsborg, Viborg, Klampenborg, or wherever you would’ve like. Oh how I regret that I did not find you and I could not serve you as a guide in your only day in Copenhagen!” (G. Tartler, 2003).

The great historian and philologist, has the merit of introducing in Denmark the study of Romanian language (E. Lozovan, 1965). From 1894 until 1929, Nyrop was a professor of Romanic languages and literature at the University of Copenhagen. Along with courses of Romanian language, he also held a course on the Romanian folk literature. Being busy with the writing of his large work *Grammaire historique de la langue française* (in 6 volumes, 1899-1930), of another six volumes of philology essays, *Ordenes liv (Life of the words, 1901-1934)*, the writing of a Spanish and Italian Grammar and a book on the French Phonetic, he didn’t get to write other books on Romania although the Romanian language was studied in his volume “*The genre flexion in Romanic languages*” (1896). He also wrote a series of articles about the Romanian literature especially in *Dania*, a periodical edited by him and published in Copenhagen (E. Lozovan, 1965).

The most valuable for the Romanians is his volume *Romanske mosaiker* in which he rehearses the Romanian cultural life with its famous personalities as Cantemir, Şincai, Petru

Maiorescu, Alecsandri, Ispirescu, the folklore collections of Miron Pompiliu and S. Florea Marian, etc... He presents a picturesque view of the life in the capital, a city of great contrasts and a series of ethnography elements, he translates the ballads of Brâncoveanu, Meșterul Manole and Mioritza and a series of melancholy Romanian folk songs ("doine"). Obviously the writers of Junimea like Negruzzi, Slavici and Gane could not be omitted. The same were Alexandru Vlahuță whom Nyrop had met at Maiorescu and whom he had visited in 1913. In the final chapter entitled "*Almindelige Tilstande*" he makes a historical and cultural synthesis of the Romanian people starting from the Dacia of Decebal and ending with Carol I (Șerban G., 1979). His book was the first one that offered to the Scandinavian public translations from the Romanian literature.

In 1898 Nyrop wrote an encyclopaedic volume in which he included additional information on the Romanian culture recalling the great chroniclers, Cantemir, the books of Neagoe Basarab, Școala Ardeleană, Asachi, Eliade, Boliac, Kogălniceanu, Ghica, C. Negruzzi, Bolintineanu, Alecsandri, Creangă, Eminescu and of course, Junimea headed by Titu Maiorescu (Șerban G., 1979). Nyrop's interest for the Romanian culture and the efforts for making it known to his country were rewarded in 1926 on the initiative of the Romanian Academy who declared him honorary member. After his death in 1931, Maiorescu took his place at the Academy of Inscription from Paris, in January 1932 (Șerban G., 1979).

The existence of these cultural contacts between Romanians and Danes during the 19th century can be really surprising if we take into account the huge distance and the differences of culture and civilization between their countries. Perhaps precisely this difference was the factor that determined their interest in knowing and meeting each other. Both countries looked at each other as to an exotic one which had to offer a lot of interesting and beautiful things to discover. The result was a gradual rapprochement between the two countries which later on led to the establishment of their diplomatic relations.

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