

Translating Esotericism: Romanian

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Introduction

A Romance language at its origin, Romanian was modified by subsequent waves of influences, notably by Slavic languages during the Middle Ages. In the nineteenth century, however, deliberate attempts were made to “purify” the language and bring it closer to its Romance roots. Despite the relative geographical distance, Romanian intellectuals looked to France in particular for cultural leadership, and many intellectuals did their studies in France. Consequently, many modern terms were borrowed from the French language, particularly during the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth centuries. According to one study, words of French origin constituted 22.12% of the Romanian representative vocabulary in 1988, with words of Latin origin coming in second place.¹ While the Communist takeover of Romania in the aftermath of World War II broke the close academic connection between Romania and France, the Romanian Communists tried to remain relatively autonomous with respect to the Soviet Union. This policy became more pronounced during the regime of Nicolae Ceaușescu (1965–1989), when French was reintroduced in the education curriculum as an alternative to Russian. After the 1989 Revolution, the connection with French culture was progressively weakened by the rise of the Anglo-Saxon cultural paradigm. Yet, Anglo-Saxon notions have often been taken wholesale from English, without adaptation into Romanian forms.

1. Sala et al., *Vocabularul reprezentativ*.

My focus in the article is on two important key terms: Western esotericism and Witchcraft/Sorcery.

“Western Esotericism”

In 2007, Antoine Faivre’s foundational *Accès de l’ésotérisme occidental* (2 volumes, 1986) was translated into Romanian as *Căi de acces la esoterismul occidental* by Ion Doru Brana, and published by the Nemira publishing house with a short foreword by Faivre himself.² Brana chose to translate the term “ésotérisme” as “esoterism” instead of the accepted form “ezoterism,” which was prescribed by the authoritative Romanian Academy’s *DOOM* dictionary of the Romanian language of 2005.³ Interestingly, the same publishing house, Nemira, had already used the “esoterism” form in a previous book, *Dictionarul esoterismului* (*Dictionnaire de l’ésotérisme*) by Pierre Riffard, published in 1998.

Due to the absence of a Western esotericism academic programme in Romania, the terminology has not been standardised. Besides the lack of clarity on whether one should use “esoterism” or “ezoterism,” it is not evident whether “Western” should be translated as “occidental” (like Brana did), or, more literally, as “vestic.” “Occidental” is a French word adopted into the Romanian language, but used interchangeably with the more colloquial as well as more emphatic term “vestic.” Incidentally, “vestic” and “occidental” denote both an actual geographical space and a space of aspiration that Romanians often use in a self-deprecatory sense to express what is not Romanian.⁴ This nuance of distancing oneself from “the West” or “the occident” must be taken into account when translating into Romanian. Another aspect worth considering is the problem of using the

2. Faivre, *Căi de acces la esoterismul occidental*.

3. *DOOM* II, 291. *DOOM* III was published at the beginning of 2022.

4. The current meaning of the term originated from the Iron Curtain demarcation of the West as the capitalist states and the East as the Communist states; hence, it should not be read literally as “to the West of Romania” (i.e., Hungary). In Communist times, the “West” was epitomised in particular by West Germany and the United States. Despite integration in the European Union (since 2007), Romanians still do not see themselves as part of the West, although they now tend to think of the East as Russia and beyond.

opposed terms “Eastern” or “oriental.” While in English they are often used as synonyms, “estic” and “oriental” are not precise equivalents in the Romanian language. In Romanian, “estic” would typically refer to matters pertaining to “Eastern Europe” and not, as in Anglo-Saxon contexts, to Asia. By comparison, the Romanian word “oriental” would normally mean “Asian,” and is applied particularly to non-Christian Eastern cultures (for instance, Russia would not be deemed an “oriental” culture, but an “Eastern” culture).⁵

This of course raises the much more important question of what “Western” or “Eastern” esotericism might mean in a Romanian context. As already mentioned, Romanians have a history of importing French cultural forms; for instance, the polymath B.P. Hașdeu (1838–1907) became an adept of the distinctly French form of Spiritualism (“Spiritisme”) created by Allan Kardec (1804–1869).⁶ However, a new wave of Romanian intellectuals that arose in the interwar period adopted forms of esotericism that were, at least overtly, anti-Western, with the West being portrayed as decadent and weak. Thus, many of these young intellectuals supported or even joined the far right “legionary” group, whose doctrine was to create an autocratic government allied with the Orthodox Church.⁷ Famous examples include historian of religions Mircea Eliade (1907–1986) and the essayist Emil Cioran (1911–1995).⁸ Although usually linked to a militant form of Orthodoxy, the far-right views of interwar Romanian intellectuals cannot be strictly deemed “Eastern” esotericism, as they were consonant with and often inspired by contemporary Western movements like völkishness and certain forms of Traditionalism.⁹

5. That being said, Eastern Orthodox Christianity has sometimes been translated as “creștinism oriental.”

6. B.P. Hașdeu even published a striking manifesto of his belief in Spiritism as *Sic Cogito*.

7. See for instance the authoritative analysis of Zigu Ornea, *Anii treișeci* (unfortunately not translated into English). For a recent analysis of the sliding of many young Romanian intellectuals toward the far right, see Bejan, *Intellectuals and Fascism in Interwar Romania*.

8. In particular, Eliade’s legionary affiliation has cast a long shadow over his work, even as (or perhaps because) he sought to remain quiet about it; on the controversy, see for instance Ellwood, *Politics of Myth*.

9. On völkish traditions, see the classic work by Mosse, *Crisis of German Ideology*. As Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke has described it, völkishness was characterised by nationalism, anti-liberalism, cultural pessimism and racism (see *Occult Roots of Nazism*, 2). In Romania, beliefs of a völkish type included those of Romanian exceptionalism mixed with a firm adherence to Christian

Another Romanian movement that cannot easily be bracketed as “Western” or “Eastern” esotericism is the “Burning Bush” group (*Rugul aprins*, 1945–1948). Led by the poet Sandu Tudor (1896–c.1962) and the Russian exile monk Ivan Kulighin (1885–c.1950s), it comprised some of the leading intellectuals and theologians of the period, and was harshly repressed by Communist authorities between 1958 and 1964 as a quasi-legionary subversive organisation.¹⁰ The fervently Orthodox mystical leanings of the Burning Bush group were later articulated in the writings of Dumitru Stăniloae (1903–1993)¹¹ and, particularly, André Scrima (1925–2000).¹² Its roots lay in the Orthodox practice of hesychasm,¹³ the popular spirituality of the *Philokalia*,¹⁴ but also in the Russian Sophiology of Vladimir Solovyov (1853–1900), Paul Florensky (1882–1943) and Sergei Bulgakov (1871–1944), themselves inspired by Jacob Boehme’s Theosophy.¹⁵ Besides such Boehme roots, there may have been a similar influence from French Traditionalism, particularly on Burning Bush dissident and cleric André Scrima.¹⁶

Orthodoxy as defining the “Romanian” national spirit. It is important to note that the “legionaries” (which formed the paramilitary *Garda de Fier*, the Iron Guard) also tended to be virulently anti-Semitic.

10. The full sentence pronounced by the Communist authorities against the Burning Bush group is available here: Ioana Diaconescu, “Dosar RL: Rugul Aprins al Maicii Domnului. Condamnarea 8 noiembrie 1958 – Sentința nr. 125,” *Romania literară* 1–2 (2013), 11–23, retrievable at https://web.archive.org/web/20150924131500/http://www.romlit.ro/rugul_aprins_al_maicii_domnului_condamnarea_8_noiembrie_1958_sentina_nr_125, accessed 23 Jan 2022

11. On Dumitru Stăniloae’s theology, see Berger, “Theological Gnoseology”; Louth, “Orthodox Dogmatic Theology.”

12. A brief introduction to the “Burning Bush” and André Scrima is provided in Giocas & Ladouceur, “Burning Bush Group.” The first substantial translation of Scrima into English is *Apophatic Anthropology*; however, Scrima’s work on the Burning Bush, *Timpul Rugului Aprins*, still awaits an English translation.

13. Ware, *Act Out of Stillness*. On Romanian hesychasm, see Țuțea, “Short History of Hesychasm in Romania.”

14. The *Philokalia* is an anthology of Greek Orthodox writings compiled in the eighteenth century and first published in Greek in 1793, then translated in many other languages; for the English version, see Ware & Sherrard, *Philokalia*.

15. On this topic, see the classical study of David, “Influence of Jacob Boehme.”

16. Marco Toti has argued for the influence of Traditionalism, particularly René Guénon, on Scrima’s monograph (“Religious Morphology”). Scrima, an Orthodox cleric who was a strong

Sorcery, Witch(craft), Wicca

Although the English term “magic” is usually translated into Romanian simply as “magie,” there is a deeper substrate of terms related to the practice that could be of interest to a global Western esotericism nomenclature. For instance, witchcraft is translated as “vrăjitorie,” which itself draws on the term “vraja.” The latter might be translated as “charm” or “spell”; however, the origin of the word “vraja” is unclear. It has been tentatively derived from a Slavic “vraza,” meaning “divination or incantation,” but the term is rarely used in Slavic languages, except for the Polish “wrog.”¹⁷ On the other hand, the term seems similar to the Iberic languages “brujeria” and “bruja” (Spanish), “bruxa” (Portuguese) and “bruixa” (Catalan). The Iberic form has been attributed to pre-Roman Iberic languages, while the Romanian version may possibly have a Thracian-Dacian heritage. An interesting association is made with the archaic Romanian term “vraci,” which has the dual meaning of “physician” and “wizard” (“vrăjitor”). This again has a Slavic root (“vraču”: “healer,” “doctor”). The suggestion is that in older times, the function of “vrăjitor” was not necessarily distinct from that of a healer, which seems to resonate with the non-European tradition of the “medicine man.” Moreover, the term suggests that the function was essentially viewed as masculine.

An interesting alternative to “vrăjitor” was the archaic term “solomonar.” In the nineteenth century, the etymologist Lazăr Șăineanu argued that this word originated from the medieval book *Solomon and Marcolf*.¹⁸ It is not known how early this book was present in the Romanian region; translations into Polish date as far back as 1521. Although this provenance has not been disputed, one may also wonder if occult sources such as the *Keys of Solomon* had a stronger

supporter of the ecumenical movement, talked about the “Tradition” of Eastern contemplation, and prefaced the Romanian translation of Frithjof Schuon, *Unitatea transcendențială a religiilor*. On the consonance between Scrima and René Guénon, but also Scrima’s criticism of Traditionalist theses, see also Montanari, *La fatica del cuore*.

17. See Vinereanu, *Dicționar etimologic*.

18. Șăineanu, *Incercare asupra semasiologiei limbii române*.

influence on the establishment of this odd term. If so, this suggests that “magus,” “magician,” “vrăjitor,” “vraci” and “solomonar” were interchangeable, thus further pointing to the fact that the practice of magic (“vrajă”) was particularly seen as the purview of learned magicians rather than the unlearned witches targeted during the Western witch-hunts, for which there was no parallel phenomenon in the Eastern Orthodox lands. Nevertheless, a change of perception can be noticed in the later twentieth century: since 1989, magic is seen as being practiced by women (“vrăjitoare,” roughly equivalent to “witches”) rather than men. This has become so typical that the Romanian Wikipedia entry for “Vrăjitorie” only uses the feminine “vrăjitoare” for “a person who practices ‘vrăjitoria’.” However, in a blatant display of lack of historical awareness, the additional remark is made that in “modern contexts,” particularly Wicca, “men can also be called ‘vrăjitori’.”¹⁹ There has indeed been a proliferation of services offered more or less overtly by “vrăjitoare,” which seems to be part of a belated New Age fashion.

Conclusion

The examples used above should offer some food for thought to those who think notions such as “Western esotericism” or “vrăjitor” are clear and fixed categories across space and time. Notions such as “Western” and “Eastern” esotericism might seem unproblematic when looked at from a far enough distance (for instance, East Asia compared to Western Europe). However, the distinction becomes moot when we look at borderline regions like Eastern Europe. In particular, esoteric movements linked with Christian Orthodox mysticism do not clearly fit in the traditional “Western” or “Eastern” esoteric categories, especially when connections with Western mystical movements are considered. Should the practice of hesychasm or Russian Sophiology be deemed a “Western” or an “Eastern” form of esotericism?²⁰ Such ambiguity in categorising movements

19. Anon., “Vrăjitorie,” *Wikipedia*, <https://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vrajitorie>, accessed 23 Jan 2022.

20. On Russian Sophiology, see Valliere, *Modern Russian Theology*. In his entry “Byzantium,” in

leads to problems of translation in the context of a language like Romanian that lies in a liminal cultural space.

Similar problems occur when a Romanian term of unclear origins like “vrăjitorie” is translated back into English. Translating it as “witchcraft” reflects certain assumptions, including a female inflexion that was not there in the first place. Indeed, as I have shown, “vrăjitoria” seems to initially have been connected with the male realm and with medicine and magic. Translating the term as “sorcery” might be more advisable, but then again, the English term has a negative connotation that does not seem to have existed in Romanian.

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the *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 218–25, Robert Mathiesen distinguished between “Western esotericism” and “Christian Orthodox esotericism,” claiming that the former referred to “rejected or forgotten knowledge,” while the latter “always remained a fully integrated part of the ‘dominant paradigm,’ and never formed the nucleus of any Byzantine ‘counter-culture’” (220–221). This comes across as an oversimplification of the complexity of Orthodox Christianity, which is not a static tradition and goes beyond a simple bracketing as “Byzantine” Christianity. Even Mathiesen points to the controversies surrounding the practice of hesychasm in fourteenth-century Byzantium, which argues against his blanket description of it always being “fully integrated” into the Byzantine Church. Moreover, simply dismissing Russian Sophiology as “pseudo-Byzantine esotericism” (219) disregards its strong influence in Christian Orthodox Churches and twentieth-century Orthodox theology.

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