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IN MEMORIAM LEON LEVITCHI: A LIFE OF EXCELLENCE

Elena-Carmen BOBOCESCU¹

Abstract

For Romanian Anglophiles as well as for many alumni with a degree in English Letters at the University of Bucharest, the year 2018 appears to be important in more than one way: not only does it mark the centenary of the Great Union and the coming into existence of modern Romania, but it is also the year we commemorate the birth centenary of a prominent cultural personality - Leon Levitchi. Born on August 27 1918, the former professor at the Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literatures directed and contributed to the development of the Department of English during the difficult years of the communist regime. Professor Levitchi was a model of accomplished scholar as he combined teaching, translating, academic research and extensive publishing; he authored some of the best English-Romanian dictionaries, the first handbook for Romanian translators into English and detailed grammar books which guided generations of Romanian students into the learning and teaching of English. One of his major achievements is the translation of George Călinescu's History of the Romanian Literature published in 1989 which offered West-European scholars the chance to find out more about the literary history of a country behind the Iron Curtain.

Key words: Birth centenary – Leon Levițchi; Anglistics, lexicography, translations studies, academic research and excellence.

In Memoriam Leon Levitchi: A Life of Excellence

Introduction For Romanian anglophiles as well as for many of the University of Bucharest alumni with a degree in English Letters, the year 2018 appears to be important in more than one way: not only does it mark the centenary of the Great Union and the coming into existence of modern Romania, but it is also the year we commemorate the birth centenary of a prominent cultural personality - Leon Levițchi.

¹ PhD Candidate, Doctoral School of Literary and Cultural Studies, University of Bucharest, elenacarmenro@yahoo.com

A genius of Romanian Anglistics as he was hailed by the Professor Lidia Vianu, Leon Levițchi had a huge contribution to the foundation and development of the English Cultural Studies, as he wrote several grammar books for the use of students, courses of Lexicology and English Literature, English to Romanian as well as Romanian to English dictionaries; a skillful lexicographer, he translated from Upton Sinclair, Theodor Dreiser, Jonathan Swift, Jerome K Jerome, Robert Burns, William Stevenson, Ralph Emmerson, Christopher Marlowe, Robert Green, Robert Browning as well as the complete works of William Shakespeare into Romanian. He also translated into English poems by Eminescu, Octavian Goga and George Coșbuc, Romanian folk ballads and George Călinescu's History of the Romanian Literature.

For Professor C. George Săndulescu, the co-editor of Leon Levițchi's Archives at Contemporary Literature Press, Leon Levițchi and his friend Dan Duțescu were the „Two gems of Romanian Literature and of translation into English” (Leon Levițchi's Archives 1, 91)². The present paper intends to outline some of the most important biographic moments and representative works of this Renaissance-like personality.

Born on August 27 1918 in Edineț, Hotin County, Kingdom of Romania in Bucharest) to Diomid Leu, an Orthodox clergyman and teacher, and Zenovia Gârlea, a primary school teacher, he went to secondary school in Hotin and then in Chernivtsi, taking his baccalaureat exam in Chernivtsi in 1937.³

He was a precocious child who learnt to read early with the aid of his mother and even made up a press to print his own poems when he was six. In 1940 he started to study the English language from a book offered by his grandfather.

In highschool he was a diligent student. In December 1936 he made his literary debut with the poem *Ce spune marea/What the Sea Says* in *Aurora* – the magazine of Hotin highschool of boys – along with a short text about the Monastery of Neamț.

On his graduation he was rewarded with a journey to Norway for his remarkable school results. On this occasion he wrote a travelog *Chemarea Nordului/The Call of the North* in which he recorded his impressions about the journey. The text written in 1937 has both biographic and literary value as it offers insights into the mind of the young Levițchi and can be considered the starting point of a long and fruitful intellectual journey. The manuscript of this diary was published for the first time by Contemporary Literature Press in LLA 4.

From 1937 to 1941 Levițchi studied at the The Department of Letters and Philosophy, School of English Studies, University of Bucharest. His choice of English as a subject of study is motivated in the *Self-Portrait* – which can be read as a personal statement (LLA I, 5). He apparently opted for English in rebellion against the complexity of German, as it appeared to him as a more elegant language with a less difficult grammar. As a fresh student he realised he had been wrong all along as he was forced to retake the study of English in a more systematic way; everything he accomplished later was due to his systematic approach and hard working on a regular basis. According to his daughter, Veronica Focșeneanu and his fellow researcher Dan Duțescu, Leon Levițchi studied and worked on his various papers between 10 to 14 hours every single day, with the exception of Christmas and Easter when he would rest by reading from the Bible. (LLA I, 56;60)

² For reasons of brevity, *Leon Levițchi – Archives* will be abridged to LLA, as they also appear on the site of Contemporary Literature Press.

³ The biographic data are compiled from two sources, mainly from Veronica Focșeneanu's interview published by Contemporary Literature Press and Răzvan Moceanu's on-line article, "Portret: 100 de ani de la nasterea lui Leon Levițchi, cel mai valoros anglist din istoria noastră, Radio România Cultural".

Levițchi majored in English language and literature, while his minor was aesthetics and literary criticism. He took his BA degree with a paper on Byron's irony/*Ironia la Byron* in 1941. After his graduation he was called up and served as an interpreter and translator for the Romanian military during the Second World War.

After the war, he started teaching English, first at high school level in 1946 and then at the University of Bucharest where he worked as a teaching assistant between 1949-1955; he became lecturer in 1955. In 1968 he defended his PhD thesis *Subliniere lingvistică în opera dramatică a lui William Shakespeare/Linguistic Highlighting in William Shakespeare's Drama*. He would become Associate Professor in 1969 and later on Professor at the English Department of the University of Bucharest, which he developed and directed during the bleak years of communism until 1980 when he was forced to retire. Due to his teaching skills, dictionaries, courses and textbooks of English he became legendary while still living both among his students and Romanian anglophiles. During the sixth, seventh and the eighth decade there was hardly any home of intellectuals without a copy of „Engleza fără profesor/Teach Yourself English”, a method of self-study combining texts, grammar, vocabulary and phonetic transcripts, which Levițchi devised along with Dan Dutescu.

Leon Levițchi became member of the Romanian Writers' Union in 1955, (Translator section), and of the International Association of University Professors of English in 1968. He was granted the Romanian Academy Award and the Romanian Writers' Union's Translation Award for the translation of a volume of Robert Browning's poems in 1972 and for the translation (along with Andrei Bantaș) of a volume of Eminescu's Poems which came out in bilingual edition in 1978.

Professor Levițchi was a complex scholar with a wide expertise in Philology as he combined teaching, translating, and academic research and extensive publishing; less is known however about his own literary writings. He wrote poetry, short prose and a rather long play *Inimi Ruginite/Rusty Hearts*, whose main character Artur Cristian is highly critical about his friends' mediocre lives lacking in high ideals and push them through psychological experiments in order to help them clean their rusty hearts. It is a quasi-fantasy play mixing modern characters with fantastic personages symbolising different feelings and emotions struggling within the philosopher's own heart.

As a philosopher, artist and later on assistant at the university, Artur seems to embody the aspiration and the quest for perfection of Levițchi himself in a certain way. In the end, like a modern Faustus, Artur gives up to the Wizard (standing for the devil) his own heart, his capacity of love and suffering, in order to clean of rust hundreds of other hearts. The ending may be read as a possible metaphor for the work of a professor who also has to give up his emotions in order to purify the minds of his students.

Among the most important works written for students are worth mentioning *A Course in English Lexicography*, an *English Grammar Book* (with Ioan Preda) and *A History of English and American Literature* in two volumes.

To honour the path-breaking work of Leon Levițchi and his crucial contribution to the development of the Anglistic and Intercultural Studies Professors Lidia Vianu and George C. Săndulescu, two of his former students, have taken the task of publishing some excerpts from his major works along with less known texts as well as private writings. Thus between January and June 2018 over twenty volumes of Leon Levițchi's archives were published online, bringing to the public attention a huge amount of miscellaneous writings (short stories,

plays, poems, drafts and notes) as well as copies of old notebooks in which he jotted down thoughts, short comments, poetic lines and even musical scores.

Scrolling through hundreds of pages of texts which record Levitchi's work as well as his private thoughts in his own handwriting is a fascinating and rewarding enterprise; it provides the interested reader with the opportunity of discovering the professor's cultural personality in all his complexity: not only as an academic, but also as a travel and diary writer (*Inimi Ruginite/Rusty Hearts*), as a playwright, a poet, a novelist (*Calatoriile lui Lapsus/ Lapsus' Travels*) and as a keen critic.

The first volume of Leon Levitchi's archive came out in 2013 on the occasion of his 95th anniversary: Levitchi's *Self-portrait*, Dan Duțescu's interview *Lev*, Lidia Vianu's interview with his daughter Veronica Focșeneanu, Professor C Săndulescu articles on Leon Levițchi and Dan Duțescu, as well as Sandulescu's correspondence with Levițchi can help us reconstruct the image of the scholar: noble character and they also reveal a few less known personality traits and the wide scope of his cultural interests.

Professor Levițchi adopted more traditional methods of teaching grammar at the University; he belonged to an older generation of professors as he himself admitted in an interview to Radio România, 1973; he took a rather defiant stance to Chomsky linguistic and refused to give up the tradition of language teaching in which he was formed and excelled:

Well—you see—quite, quite accidentally, I belong to an older generation; and quite, quite accidentally, for twenty years on end I taught English grammar to our students; and I taught them in the spirit of Charles Bally and Harold Palmer, not in that of Chomsky.... I do not in the least believe in the idea that the history of linguistics should be divided into two: the pre- and the post-Chomsky period. I should rather say: I believe in things that can be demonstrated and I do not believe in things that cannot be demonstrated. If—if!—the new achievements of linguistics can prove that we have been in the wrong, and the new achievements are in the right, all the better—we shall surrender to them: but, if they cannot justify themselves, all the worse—we shall not surrender, and we shall go on saying that it is much much better to speak of subject and predicate than of subject and predicate group...

Equally endowed for language and literature, his favourite work was that of a lexicographer; he excelled at the difficult task of writing lexicons, while acknowledging the never ending labour of dictionary makers. Thus in his final remarks to *A Course in English Lexicology*, Levițchi quotes from Julius Caesar Scaliger, an Italian Renaissance scholar who used to speak of the 'tortures' inherent to any dictionary making.

Dictionary work is difficult, indeed, but "... it is all the more fascinatingly interesting. It offers both the joy of creative, scientific work and the satisfaction of putting into practice the results of theoretical investigation. For lexicography, alongside pedagogical activity and textbooks, is that domain of linguistics where theory finds its way into practice and is translated into life. With all the efforts of the lexicographers, no dictionary can be 'perfect': between the first moments of its compilation and the moment of its printing, new words and meanings make it lose its 'up-to-dateness'." (LLA 1, 39-40)

By and large, Leon Levițchi was a keen adept of applied linguistics, with a special penchant for translation and cultural studies. He also did pioneer work in the field of Translation studies as he wrote *A Guide for English to Romanian Translators/Îndrumar pentru traducătorii din*

limba engleză and *A Handbook for English Translators/Manualul traducătorului de limba engleză*. In his Self Portrait essay Levițchi gave the most accurate description of himself as a philologist:

I considered myself a linguist only to a certain extent, in a restricted meaning of the term (traditional, pragmatic, applied...) and likewise a literary researcher... and a translator –without any semantic constraints, on the contrary I daresay, with more extensions, since I have always considered the bilingual lexicography as a subspecies of the translation genre. And I dedicated the most important part of my life as a mediator between two cultures and a great many hours of course and seminar as part of my teaching activity. In my opinion, translation represents the most complex form of teaching and learning at a foreign languages department, especially when the source text is a poem, as it also involves knowledge of the musical laws, of the rhythm and melody and of the correct pronunciation of words – beside the study of denotation, of the lexical, grammatical and stylistic highlighting, coherence and style...(LLA 1, 7)⁴

Levițchi's honest self-assessment is on par with his academic achievements. Apart from his university courses and dictionaries, we owe to Levițchi the translation of Eminescu's best-known poems into English. His translation of *Luceafărul /The Morning Star* is an outstanding example and a model for the translation of rhymed poetry: throughout the 98-stanza poem Levițchi managed to maintain the rhythm and the rhyme of the source text, while offering the closest to the original possible translation.

Together with fellow researcher Andrei Bantaș, Levițchi edited in 1991 what is so far the most comprehensive English-Romanian dictionary on paper, with over 70,000 entries. The two had also previously published a bilingual Romanian-English edition of Mihai Eminescu's poems.

In the article “Two Great Translators into English — Levițchi and Duțescu — Two Personalities to Remember” Professor C. George Săndulescu paid homage to Levițchi and Duțescu's high academic standards and their moral integrity.

Both Levițchi and Duțescu had the same professional orientation:... their attention was equally divided between English Literature and English Language, with special focus on the heavyweights of Poetry. Duțescu took Geoffrey Chaucer, and made a lifetime target of the job of translating Chaucer's Complete Works... Levițchi took the only other heavyweight left, and did the same: he translated into Romanian the complete works of William Shakespeare. (LLA 1, 90)

Professor Săndulescu also underlines the political persecution and the humiliation endured by the two great English academics at the hands of the Communist regime and its apparatchiks that constantly targeted and pushed to the bottom high-standard intellectuals who refused to compromise with the system.

Levițchi and Duțescu were fellow-students in Bucharest in the years of the Second World War, studying the same subject—English—and... very close friends... they lived, worked and suffered Communist persecution together... Levițchi was the last descendant of a family of Greek-Orthodox priests from the far north of Romania. His Russian language was practically as good as his native Romanian. All that was a great linguistic advantage, but was at the same time, a great political drawback.

⁴ Translation mine.

Refusing to play the petty Communist games... and being drawn down by his religious family background (his signature, even throughout the worst years, ended in a subtly placed cross at the end of it!), he was constantly demoted throughout his university career. (LLA 90)

In an interview taken by Professor Lidia Vianu, Veronica Focșeneanu refers to his father as a well-educated person, a perfectionist, with a deep love for music, culture and spirituality. He played the violin, composing long musical phrases and wrote both poetry and prose with remarkable easiness (LLA 1, 61).

In an article entitled “Lev” Dan Duțescu urged anyone who wanted to get a first impression about Leon Levițchi’s work to check the catalogue of the Academy Library. One will be amazed by the number of index cards with his name as there are over 100 titles of books authored or co-authored by Leon Levițchi, which literally speak volumes about his extraordinary intellectual prolificity.

Thus, in the last 10 years of his life, after his imposed retirement from the English Department Leon Levitchi accomplished some of his greatest works: the 70 000-word English-Romanian Dictionary, published at Editura Științifică in 1984, an *Anthology of English Poetry* at Minerva Publishing House in 1984, the translation of Shakespeare’s Complete Works which appeared in 9 volumes at Univers Publishing House between 1982 and 1985; last but not least the impressive translation of George Calinescu’s *Istoria literaturii române/History of Romanian Literature* commissioned by Professor Iosif Constantin Dragan which came out at Nagard Publishing House in 1989, after negotiations at the highest level of the Communist Party as the book was published outside Romania.

Besides all this, Levițchi wrote a great number of studies, articles and prefaces to his own works or someone else’s. He died in 1990 aged 71, right after he finished the work at his last dictionary.

Himself a poet, he once questioned the task of poetry writing in one of his poems: „nu e absurd să„exprim” în versuri/grozava întrepătrundere de universuri? /isn’t it absurd to express in verses/the terrible entangling of universes?” (LLA 19, *Multe și de toate/Miscellany*) The answer to such a question may be found or more likely inferred from his own poems, many of which came out for the first time on the occasion of his centenary.

Conclusion

To assess the personality and work of so outstanding a personality is not a simple task. It would take years of research to gather and go through the huge amount of texts published in order to write a study that would do justice to such a complex cultural figure. Professor Leon Levițchi fully deserves a monograph wherein his works, his pioneering efforts, his academic status and major contribution to the development of Anglophone studies should be thoroughly addressed and hopefully such task will be accomplished in the near future.

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Short Biography

Elena-Carmen BOBOCESCU graduated in 2001 from the Faculty of Theology, University of Bucharest with a double degree in Orthodox Theology and English Letters. In 2004 she obtained a Master's Degree in Humanities at the “Henry IV” Institute of Anglophone Studies, University of Paris VII. Between 2002-2016 she worked as a teaching assistant at the Department of Modern Languages of the Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literatures, teaching practical courses of English to students from several faculties of the University of Bucharest. At present she is a PhD candidate at the Doctoral School of Literary and Cultural Studies, doing research for a thesis on the Techniques of Self-writing in Oscar Wilde's Letters.