

THE ROMANIAN-JAPANESE DIPLOMACY. POETRY - A PRECURSOR

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Abstract

The literary creation, mainly the lyrical one, has represented an incipient binder of the Romanian-Japanese relations in the last two centuries. Romanian travellers through the Land of the Rising Sun wrote about Japanese society and its culture, providing the reader with information about the archipelago and creating the premises for later diplomatic dialogue. Preceding the diplomatic texts of the official representatives of the two countries, mutual knowledge through literature facilitated the founding and consolidation of bilateral relations up to the level of a Strategic Partnership in 2023. After the translation into Romanian of some Japanese short poems in the nineteenth century, a significant moment in the knowledge of the lyrical specificity of the two nations was the meeting between the poets Carmen Sylva and Maresuke Nogi, in Peleş, in 1911.

Keywords: *diplomacy, poetry, Romania, Japan, relations.*

1. KNOWLEDGE THROUGH LITERATURE

In the temporal proximity of the official opening of Romanian-Japanese relations, at the beginning of the twentieth century, poetry catalysed the mutual knowledge of the two peoples, as a true diplomatic lever.

Over the centuries, in interstate relations, poetry and diplomacy have inextricably complemented and correlated each other. The Dutch poet Willem van Haren (1710-1768), for example, through his poems, played an overwhelming role in negotiating political settlements during the War of the Austrian Succession (1740-1748), following the death of the Roman-German Emperor Charles VI.

In Romania, Vasile Alecsandri (1821-1890), Lucian Blaga (1895-1961) and Scarlat Cantacuzino (1874-1949) are just three prominent names among the diplomatic poets who supported their country in international relations, including through lyrical creation.

Closer to the relationship with Japan, the former ambassador Gheorghe Băgulescu (1886-1963) asserted himself in literature not only through the trilogy "The Japanese Soul," which brought him the prize of the Japanese Academy of Sciences and the "Grand Prix de Littérature" in France, but also through his short poems such as "haiku."

The political interaction of the Romanian "diplomatic poets" with the Japanese ones in the last century and a half represented a precursor of the gradual institutionalization of bilateral relations up to today's Strategic Partnership.

Before the First World War, Romania's international relevance was found in Japan's obvious steps to open diplomatic missions in the two capitals.

The exchange of letters between the sovereigns of our countries in the years 1880-1881 was due to Romania's importance in the Balkans and our natural resources, on the one hand, but also to the increase of Japan's role in the Far East, on the other hand. In June 1902, the Japanese diplomats in Vienna proposed the opening of the diplomatic relations with Bucharest and the conclusion of a bilateral treaty, leading to the sending of Nicolae Xenopol to Japan, as Romania's first ambassador, in 1917.

Among the embryos of the bilateral ties, the writings played a decisive role, their prominent representatives in Romania including: Milescu Spătaru (1636-1708), Anatolie Tihai (1839-1893), Basil Assan (1860-1918), Constantin Găvănescul (1871-1942), Otilia Cozmuță (1873-1951), Dumitru Nistor (1893-1971), Ion Timuș (1890-1969), Elie Bufnea (1897-1987), Voicu Nițescu (1889-1954), Victor Cadu (1891-1980), Gheorghe Băgulescu (1886-1963) and other personalities who dipped their pen in the ink of Japanese culture and society.

Romanian literature records the first data about Japan at the end of the seventeenth century, through the scholar Nicolae Milescu, a traveller in China in the years 1675-1676. In his work "*The Description of China*," the chapter "*Description of the famous and great island of the Japanese and what is there*," he reported what he learned about the archipelago. According to Marco Polo's notes of the thirteenth century, he had presented important data about the Japanese society, with its traditions and religion.

In 1904 the poet Alexandru Vlahuță published the study "*Japanese Poetry and Painting*," exemplifying his approach through several Japanese "tanka" poems, translated from French.

After 1900, Alexandru Macedonski's lyrics, crossing a filter of essentialization specific to Japanese poems, created *the Rondels*, a poetic discourse resulting from the synthesizing effort based on metaphor. His poetry had become a suggestion, through its fine Japanese overtones, as in *The Rondel of the Water in the Japanese Garden*, *The Rondel of the Japanese Sea*, *The Rondel of the Museum* or *The Roshawarei Rondel*.

If we take into account that the poets Lucian Blaga and Nichifor Crainic were in the rotunda of the Romanian Athenaeum at the establishment of the Romanian-Japanese Cultural Association on March 25, 1940 (Universul newspaper, 1940), together with George Enescu, Marta Bibescu, the Japanese ambassador, Gheorghe Băgulescu and other personalities, we can imagine the contribution of our literature to the bilateral diplomatic dialogue in the last century.

We symbolically present below a significant episode of the Romanian-Japanese lyrical dialogue: the meeting of the poet Carmen Sylva (Queen Elizabeth) with the count and poet Maresuke Nogi, in Peleş, on July 9, 1911.

2. ROYAL LUNCH IN PELEȘ

In an atmosphere of refined cultural attire, two precursors of Romanian-Japanese diplomacy, the poets Carmen Sylva and Maresuke Nogi, wrote history at the royal dinner in Peleş Castle, on July 9, 1911.

Guest of honour, seated face to face with King Carol I, the Japanese Count Maresuke Nogi had

a cordial conversation with the poet Carmen Sylva on his left. With an intelligent, gentle and agreeable expression, Nogi perfectly concealed the boldness abundantly demonstrated on the battlefields.

Identifying common lyrical affinities, Queen Elizabeth proved to be knowledgeable about the literary preoccupations of the Empress of Japan, Haruko, while Count Nogi demonstrated the contrasting poetic sensitivity of a soul of a fearless national hero.

After breakfast, in a surprising gesture, Queen Elizabeth offered the Japanese man a bouquet of azaleas, along with a photo of her grandson, Carol, dressed in national costume.

How did the winner from Port-Arthur get to Peleş? He had accompanied Prince Higashifumi Yorihito, the representative of the Emperor of Japan to the coronation ceremony of King George V of Great Britain, and on his return, he visited Romania, as shown in Marshal Maresuke Nogi's Travel Diary in Europe republished in 1994 by Toyohiro Yoshida.

Back in his country, understanding that the queen loved flowers and autumn landscapes, M. Nogi sent the sovereign a branch of Japanese maple (momiji) with rusty-reddish leaves from the garden of the "Gakushuin" imperial university.

Touched by the gift, the Queen drew the leaves on a parchment, under which she calligraphed the poem she composed, "Homage Song," with praise for the hero, emphasizing the contrast between his military bravery and poetic feeling:

*The magnificent hero wins everywhere.
Her eagle eyes that cross borders
They can often be gentle, giving warmth to the
female soul
And touching the child's heart.*

3. THREE POEMS BY COUNT MARESUKÉ NOGI

Although put on the back burner after military victories, Nogi's poetic creation remains well defined in Japanese literature, taught even in schools.

The first poem, "The Peak of Souls" (after the Battle of 203 Hill), translated by me, emphasizes the military honour:

*No one can say that the climb was easy.
Honor is a height that is difficult to conquer.
It grows and stretches with iron and blood scales.
Towards the Peak of Souls - mourning.*

Despite the efforts, at the second filter of the translation something of the Japanese original is lost. The lack of an alternative led me to the English version by Chris Beckett and Isao Miura ("Souls Mountain, after the Battle of 203 Hill", 1905). Trying, beyond translation, to render the echo of the vibration produced by reading in the soul, aware that I am losing some of the subtleties of the original, I dared to offer the Romanian language at least a crumb of the hero's intense lyricism, inviting a ballot of the general's poems. I sifted through various translation variants in my mind, hardly abandoning the temptation to compare the rise of honour with the work of Sisyphus, because the famous legendary character does not exist in Japanese mythology. Golgotha did not fit either, although analogies would have been found.

The second poem, "Beyond the Citadel of the Golden Land," equally difficult to translate, would sound like this:

*The hills and the river and the grass and the trees,
Cruel desolation around as far as the eye can see.*

*A sordid wind embalmed with blood
Above the fresh battlefield.*

*In steadfastness the horses,
Men in silence.*

*Under the sun sunset rays -
Out of the City of the Golden Land.*

(translated from English by Michael Hardy and Joern Keck).

As an example of the gaps in translation there is the word "ice" used in the original Japanese to describe the immovability of horses, a term that became "water" in later ideograms. I understood

that the poem also conceals the "Pure Land" from the Buddhist faith, that paradise to which souls migrate after death, but the interpretation sifts without discerning sometimes, depriving us of the meaning of the lost ballast.

The third example of the bard Nogi's lyrics that I bring to attention, his final poem, "The Lord of the World," displays the supreme loyalty and piety towards the emperor, feelings that far exceeded the fear of death, leading the author to commit seppuku, together with his wife, in a height of honour:

*The Lord of the World
It was accomplished,
And after him,
To serve my lord,
I'm following in his footsteps.*

The master of the world in the poem was Emperor Meiji (Mutsuhito) himself, the one who modernized Japanese society in the second half of the nineteenth century. The poet general Nogi considered it his duty to serve his master loyally until after life, through the supreme sacrifice, understanding, as a valiant fighter, that death must be assumed, not feared.

4. WHO WAS THE GENERAL-POET MARESUKE NOGI

If Queen Elizabeth, with the literary pseudonym Carmen Sylva, is well known to us, the same cannot be said about the poet Nogi. The son of a samurai, who became a Japanese national hero, he wanted to become a poet since childhood, but his father insisted on him joining the army. Accepting his father's will with filial piety, he proved to be, from the beginning, a seditious nonconformist, punished for drinking alcohol and frequenting disreputable neighbourhoods. However, he became a fearless soldier in war, decorated with the "Order of the Rising Sun" and elevated to the noble rank of count (September 21, 1907), after being granted the title of baron (August 20, 1895). The titles authenticated the nobility of a poetic spirit of unparalleled refinement.

Today, Nogi is considered a Shinto deity, and there are several "Nogi temples" in Japan,

including Nasushiobara, Fushimi-ku, Shimonoseki, and Hannō.

A 20-minute walk from the Romanian Embassy in Tokyo, the memorial house where the general lived, transformed into a Shinto temple (*Nogi Jinja Shrine*), can still be visited today, two days a year, on September 12 and 13, in the setting of the ever-present white chrysanthemums, funerary.

On a morbid note, I wonder how anyone could have lived in the house where he had raised his two sons - killed in the war he led. The most heartbreaking area, the attic where his two sons lived, is closed to visitors.

Then comes the question: what did General Nogi feel kneeling on the tatami of the same house, a few moments before committing seppuku, his wife reproducing the same act in the next room?

Built specifically to resemble the French military barracks of the type in which he had lived in his youth, the house hides its size through an architectural subterfuge, camouflaging a high ground floor by its positioning on a hill.

General C. Găvănescul, the author of the diary of Prince Carol's visit to Japan in 1920, describes in detail what he saw at the Nogi Museum: *"Everything that belonged to the hero is preserved here, like holy relics... A large display case contains all his decorations. Among them, we also recognize the Grand Cross of the "Star of Romania," which was given to him when he visited our country... It was not the highest decoration, which he received from Wallachia, that moved Nogi, while he was in Romania, but the way in which the princes and princesses of our royal family presented themselves, who gave him such great attention, such special consideration... and who, in relation to him, completely forgot their situation as princes and princesses and offered him the place of honour, as a distinguished guest, envoy of a great and friendly country..."* (Găvănescul, 1927).

5. THE IMAGE OF QUEEN ELIZABETH FOR THE JAPANESE

The Japanese admiration for Queen Elisabeth of Romania is still alive today. Master Yusai Shokoin periodically visits Romania, where he makes demonstrations of manual lace using

suveica, a technique called in English tatting, so dear to the poet Carmen Sylva, whose statue sits in the courtyard of Peles Castle. His workshops organized together with other Japanese artists at this castle are attended by students and adults, practicing the queen's occupation. At the Romanian Embassy in Tokyo, exhibitions with the works of the master Shokoin are periodically organized, such as in 2012, when, under the aegis of 110 years since the first bilateral diplomatic contacts, the exhibition was entitled "Queen Elisabeth of Romania and the lace with a spool."

6. THE SUPERNATURAL FORCE OF THE POETIC SPIRIT

Loyal to the poetry of Count Nogi, Japanese students imagine military honour as a pinnacle that shines like a gold medal on the chest of warrior and poet alike.

His relationship to death, specifically Japanese, reiterates the transition and the deep connection of man with nature, in a shocking correlation of images with spiritual concepts.

Poetic and passionate by nature of rare sensitivity, the count closed the circle of earthly life by matching the beginning with the end, in order to integrate into the universe from which he was born. He ended two ends of a "tokamak" ring tunnel millimetre, abandoning himself to infinity like an elementary particle in the CERN accelerator.

Just as modesty reigns everywhere in the Land of the Rising Sun, the life of that poet was unfolded in modesty.

The complexity of his character can only be understood in the context of the Meiji period, when Japan was the only rapidly industrialized non-Western country.

Count Nogi embodies the superhuman strength of the poetic soul grafted onto the soldier's corps, leading to the supreme gesture of September 13, 1912, in order to prove his loyalty to the emperor, in a magical amalgam of military virtue and lyrical sensitivity. His spirit inspired many, leaving an unmistakable mark on the Japanese military poetry.

Opinions about General Nogi's lyricism continue to arouse interest even today, but for

Romanians, the most striking moment remains his meeting with the poet Carmen Sylva.

7. CONCLUSIONS

Certainly, the power of the lyrical creation stimulates empathy even at the interstate level, facilitating diplomatic dialogue.

As far as I know them, the Japanese are less exuberant or "strident" than the Romanians, but that's why we don't sufficiently notice their deep sophistication. They feel comfortable in ambiguity, while we prefer black and white images, which makes the diplomatic discourse more trenchant in our country, but effective in the bilateral relationship due to the common lyrical vein.

Taking poetry into account, as a precursor of the Romanian-Japanese diplomacy, might seem fanciful, without the example of the two poets, Carmen Sylva and Maresuke Nogi, talking at a royal lunch, in a preparatory period for the opening of the official Romanian-Japanese relations, towards a better mutual knowledge of the human qualities and soul depths of the two peoples. But the true osmosis between diplomacy and poetry in the Romanian-Japanese relationship was elegantly manifested precisely through this example.

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