

POST-WAR ROMANIAN CRITICISM FROM SOCIALIST REALISM TO THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE AUTONOMY OF THE AESTHETIC (1948-1971)

TABLE OF CONTENTS:

I. CRITICISM OF SOCIALIST REALISM

II. THE TRANSITION PERIOD: TRENCH WARFARE

III. ESTABLISHMENT OF THE AUTONOMY OF AESTHETIC

IV. BETWEEN THE BARTHES-IAN MIRAGE AND THE PICARDIAN CONTEXT:
THE SYNTAX OF OCCIDENTAL RENEWALS

V. THE BIRTH OF “CRITICOLOGY”. THE BOOKS OF THE SEVENTH DECADE

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ABSTRACT

During the socialist realism period, officially instituted in 1948, literary criticism was more damaged, in a way, than literature itself. Whereas one can still identify havens of uncontaminated literature for almost two decades, with criticism, nothing of what was written between 1948 and 1965 can be grasped in absence of the socialist realist equation. By cleaning the slate of an entire cultural tradition, Stalinism had carried Romanian criticism into a triple crisis: of the object (if the entire Romanian literature were prohibited, the critics would no longer have an object for their profession), of the institution (an oligarchic structure was governing, where the message would not matter, but rather the position from where it

would be stated) and of the modalities of exercise: oral criticism was superior to written criticism, functioning as guiding principles for the writer on the path of socialist realism.

For texts written by Ion Vitner, N. Moraru, Mihai Novicov, Ov. S. Crohmăniceanu, Paul Georgescu, the focus is on such critics' "impossible mission" to prove that political necessities are, in fact, a series of aesthetic principles, pertaining to the immanence of literature. We are interested in the internal operational logic of socialist realism not because this is reliable or decisive for its establishment (undoubtedly, every detail was enforced from the exterior), but because the evolution of critic forms was carried out by the gradual exposure of such mechanisms. While the autonomy of the aesthetic was never confronted, throughout post-war Romanian criticism, with the major paradigm of socialist realism, its implied concepts, on the contrary, were questioned. We have identified this in the terms of a metonymic logic of liberalisation. Because of such slow erosion, at the middle of the seventh decade, socialist realism does not appear overwhelmed from the exterior, but rather collapses from within.

Logic and theoretical absurdities, a series of phantom-concepts, contradictory in terms of matter and undecidable in terms of expression, the notions "specific", "positive hero", "realism", "omniscience", "contemplation" represent, sum total, attempts to legitimate an aesthetic of socialist realism that should obscure the founding lie of its birth: ideological coercion. Whereas until the beginning of the Sixties they are intermittently challenged (in several more intrepid stands of Steaua writers in the First Congress of the Writers' Association in 1956 or in a famous issue of "Viata românească", 1958), following 1961, when Gh. Gheorghiu-Dej states that the fight against reactionary movements is practically ended, several positions emerge, ready to deconstruct them progressively. A new generation of critics, made of Eugen Simion, Matei Călinescu, Nicolae Manolescu, Valeriu Cristea or G. Dimisianu, will represent, during the first part of the sixties, the leading role of the so-called debates on "prose modalities", on realism or on the Marxist-Leninist legacy.

While they do not argue directly in favour of eliminating the socialist realist model, starting from eccentric prose samples written by young Nicolae Velea, Fănuș Neagu or Stefan Bănuțescu, the critics do support, however, the broadening of the notion of realism. The argument in favour of the fantastic or of the oneiric, the shattering of the narrator's omniscience in support of voice polyphony, the burdening of typical characters by the insertion of secondary traits, all these are flank turns with respect to the socialist realist monolith. The idea gaining increasing authority is that, as long as the message is correct ideologically, the writers are free to choose from a diverse range of procedures. The success would be considerable, because it would attack the very transitivity of this literature. The freedom of modalities calls for an increasingly sophisticated control, since ideologists find it necessary, in a way, to fight precisely against the fundamental ambiguity of literature. By making possible the diversification of expression, the officials opened an authentic Pandora's Box, for, irrespective of the degree of refinement of ideological limitations, they could not anticipate the dispersion of meanings. More aware than the ideologists that the literary form modifies inevitably the contents, literary analysts during the first half of the sixties hold a decisive role in the expansion of the criteria for the approach of literary works.

The argument in favour of the aesthetic is brought cautiously, by a series of strategies and retractile actions. Liberalisation becomes apparent by a general attitude rather than by a consistent and individual, extremely daring action. Even those who may approach small licences in their relationship to the system end by paying through a series of conformities. While they were writing, in 1964-1965, promoting articles and reviews for the young generation, Eugen Simion or Nicolae Manolescu published studies tributary to socialist realism. Adrian Marino or Matei Călinescu may state the validity of the aesthetic criterion only by mitigating its effects by separation from the term, ill-famed from a Marxist-Leninist perspective, of aestheticism. For such reason, it would be more accurate to state that, at the middle of the seventh decade, we were dealing with an exclusively deontological liberalisation, pertaining to the reestablishment of a series of elementary regulations of the profession, rather than with an ideological one. For the explanation of the non-polemic, but corrosive strategy of the '60s generation, we have employed a series of illustrations of ambiguity, which render, to different degrees, the relationship between militancy and passivity: "Japanese strike", "trench warfare", "Cold War", "debate with gloves on". An interesting observation concerns the absence both of polemics with respect to socialist realism, and of a manifesto of the "autonomy of the aesthetic". The evolution of post-war Romanian criticism typifies the bizarre case of mutations lacking programmes.

A consistent chapter of the liberalisation of critic forms is the Călinescu direction, the only possible direction and main "trebuchet" (N. Balotă) of young critics against dogmatism. Owing to his privileged position in the system, Călinescu would be the perfect interface of broadening critic criteria. Since Măiorescu or Lovinescu are more difficult to retrieve ideologically – considered the intellectual authors of Junimea and inter-war reactionary trend the author of *Istoria literaturii române (History of Romanian Literature)* is deemed the absolute warrantor of the dissociation of the aesthetic from the other values. For this reason, Călinescu direction is mistaken for the autonomy of the aesthetic. Hence, the support created around him and the absence of any possibility of challenge. In *Principiile de estetică (Principles of Aesthetics)*, which had become an authentic Bible of the era, the '60s generation identifies all the principles of escaping socialist realism: removal of sterile erudition and of the historical perspective – where they would denounce, often obliquely, Marxist-Leninist determinism – in favour of a critical perspective relating to the possibility of value judgment, the argument for "talent", intuition or "vocation" ("creative criticism") or for the pure relationship, un-umpired by schemes and theories, between the interpreter and the work. Established in the debates in "Steaua", year 1965, such principles constitute the hard core of the Sixties critic physiognomy.

While it has been often said that the Romanian phenomenon had relapsed during the fifties down to a prehistoric level of criticism, it has been hardly noted that liberalisation itself had rebuilt, on a small scale, the steps of cultural evolution; because an almost classicist first step, during which Romanian critics define their originality exclusively depending on the expanse and valour of references, is succeeded by a "Romantic" period, a period of stating one's right to "one's own voice". Nicolae Manolescu denounces his generation's apprehensive discourse, inspiring at the beginning of 1966, in "Gazeta literară", the most

important debate on criticism of the era. Whereas until then criticism would be, following the positivist tradition – augmented by Marxism-Leninism – a secondary discourse, in 1966 and part of 1967, it would dominate the centre of the literary stage. The debates in “Gazeta literară” are an authentic explosion of statements of principles that would all target the reestablishment of a minimal critical deontology. Marked by ideological interferences, still confined in the ideology rhetoric, diverged by timidities and misconstructions (the critics would still be confused with the limits of liberalisation), the debate would nonetheless launch and establish several important themes: the right to subjectivity – which Manolescu would cautiously name “unilateralism” –, the necessity of diversifying means by “total criticism” (Eugen Simion), postulation of the “unseen reality” of the creation (Nicolae Manolescu, Matei Călinescu, Adrian Marino, Nicolae Balotă) and, last but not least, the need of synchronisation with the Occidental critical phenomenon. The critic who would best approach Călinescu’s direction during the era, Nicolae Manolescu, is, furthermore, the only one attempting to separate, at least at the rhetorical level, from the model. Complementing the maître, the young critic does not adopt his terms (which is what the majority of Călinescu’s followers would do), but chooses to apply his own language. The core metaphors of Manolescu’s small “manifestos” do not bring up continuity, but rather they are illustrations of the opacity and rupture (“infidelity”, “betrayal”). Language personalisation is significant during a time where any new perspective would be asserted by established terms, by “mythologems” of criticism. Encouraged by a Romantic inspiration, the phrase “unfaithful readings” is, for such reason, the most popular criticism phrase of the decade.

The prevailing ideological disturbance generated an almost instinctive reserve against any scheme superordinated to the living and individual literary fact. The philosophy, the aesthetics or the theory of literature are considered, *par excellence*, modalities of constraint and they are not, under any circumstances, manners of rendering flexible the critical principles. Thus, following 1966, the bases of a new Impressionism are created; a note here, however: far from reflecting the Epicureanism of reading, such Impressionism would bear a heightened militant degree. Sartrean accents of engaged freedom, identifiable in Manolescu’s – and not only – discourse, settle the description of an inflexible impressionism, ready to reject on principle any idea that may threaten it. The positioning of the entire criticism in the same trenches would result in the blurring of differences between the ideas on literature, so that it is impossible to discuss a proper theoretical disagreement during this whole period. A real quarrel between Călinescu’s followers and the detractors Nicolae Balotă and Ovidiu Cotrus is stuck because of the formers’ fear that the introduction of more definite philosophical and theoretical criteria may revive part of the recently removed dogmatism. The distance of conception between young critics and the third post-Maiorescu generation – considered a vestige of the golden age of the autonomy of criticism –, again, is not illustrated in a direct confrontation, but rather implicitly, in a “conflict of interpretations”: Manolescu, Raicu or Valeriu Cristea distort creatively, according to their own criteria, the works by Tudor Vianu, Vladimir Streinu or Perpessicius.

By wavering the postulate of the critic’s “personality”, Sorin Alexandrescu’s, Toma Pavel’s or Virgil Nemoianu’s scientific (stylistic and structuralism) alternative does not yet

have the opportunity of assertion in the Romanian context. This would occur partially because young structuralists are in a process of preparation, unable to thrust and parry. The premises of the Călinescu direction, as well as Marxist inertias, incessantly short-circuit their construction. We have noted their quarrels with the Călinescu-type impressionism to the extent where they lay a mirror on the outcomes of the period: the secondary effect of Călinescu's direction, identifiable in the complex of talent superiority over method, delays in an intolerable manner the adoption of certain paradigms and the specialisation of critical language. On the other hand, both the Sibiu Circle's anti-Călinescu direction, and the scientific one, would prove that any attempt at drafting a concrete programme would call for a direct link to the socialist-realist paradigm, which is precisely what Nicolae Manolescu, Eugen Simion, Matei Călinescu or Adrian Marino would attempt avoiding. The insuperable standstill of the entire period – which was not acknowledged by everyone from its very beginning – would be the fact that, actually, there was no alternative: you could be one of Călinescu's followers, which would mean subjective, impressionist, maintaining equidistance from any rules or norms, or you would have to flirt, one way or another, with Marxism. The perversion is inherent in the fact that, although the latter was practically removed, it would emerge again each time that the critics would threaten to group under a shared set of norms. The officials would prefer the impressionist temporality to an actual unity of ideas. In their turn, not wanting to lose so quickly the ground conquered with difficulty, young critics would disqualify from the beginning, without weighing fine distinctions, any position that would attack the ideological innocence of impressionism.

A special chapter focuses on the relationship with Occidental – particularly French – theories and methods, to the extent where they explain the entire system of relationships of Romanian criticism during the period of “defrosting” – and not only. Undoubtedly, a decisive step of liberalisation is given by the contact with the New French Criticism, whose language is approached by the Sixties generation of critics. Apart from the vague feeling that both cultures were preparing, to a higher level than that of a mere generation handing of the torch, a modification of vision on literature, even discussion premises and themes appear to be the same: the retort against positivism, the relationship between criticism and creation, between criticism and literary history, between interpretive criticism and the valorisation one. On the other hand, the different “mission” as compared with the Occidental criticism deflects the schedule of autochthon debates. Whereas in France the abolishment of positivism would bear the significance of a revolution of methods and critical language, in Romanian context it would target primarily a reply to ideological clichés and the institution of specific norms of interpretation and valorisation of literature. Hence, after 1967, once this process is deemed closed, any protraction of the discussion on theory or criticism is seen not only as useless, but actually harmful. Almost all critics, from any generation, would denounce the self-reflexivity (“narcissism”) of Occidental criticism. It would be almost immoral to talk about methods when instead an entire literature ought to be rebuilt from the ground. The critical act as “authenticity” and as screening of values was experienced more intensely than the creation of a meta-language or the specialisation of instruments – topics of the great debates in French criticism. The autotelism of French criticism, emphasised along with the *Tel Quel* movement, would call attention to the fact that the new model was not the critic serving the literary

object, but rather the theoretician interest in the differentiation through discourse and method. Post-war Romanian criticism is, *par excellence*, an engaged and moral criticism, wholly providing for the autonomy of the aesthetic and the selection of values – hence rejecting both the amoral model of French “critical-centrism” and the inappropriateness to the aesthetic object or the lack of interest in delineating it from the other types of discourse. By favouring the straightforwardness and authenticity of the critic message after two decades during which it had been diverted by political misrepresentations, Romanian criticism considers at theoretical shades in the terms of useless complications. “Archi-subtle criticism” in Valeriu Cristea’s phrase, or “Gongorism criticism” as suggested by Nicolae Manolescu, represents negative models.

The stakes of the general reconstruction of Romanian literature and the re-naturalisation of the live contact of the critic with the creation establish the logic of external adoptions. Because, rather than paradigms and major theoretical movements (such as structuralism, phenomenology, psychoanalysis) whose attempts of explaining globally the literary phenomenon are questioned, Romanian criticism adopted applied critical concepts or languages (which W. Iser calls “tools for processes of interpretation”). Contemporary Occidental methods are absorbed by a bizarre deal with the concepts of inter-war criticism. The weightiest peculiarity of the period is a general eclecticism in which Umberto Eco is assimilated to Tudor Vianu (M. Călinescu), Călinescu anticipates Roland Barthes (N. Manolescu) or Jean Starobinski is perceived as a furtherance of G. Ibrăileanu (E. Simion). Trimmed down to inter-war principles, the innovating impact of Occidental critical languages appears diminished most of the times. The Structuralist paradigm is rejected by almost everyone on Călinescu principles: ignoring the critic’s “personality”, the living specific traits of literature or “proliferation” of scientific delirium. Those who are the most interested in the phenomenon try to tame its postulations: Adrian Marino or Paul Cornea develop a structuralism bearing “a human face”, which should not exclude the function of the subject and the value judgment. “Structure” is interpreted in Romanian context in the terms of an organic expression of the vitality of the creation, and not those of a model of machine mechanism, pure linguistic automatism. The structuralists’ abstract system of relationships is translated in the metaphor of the spider-subjectivity (A. Marino), which, from its absolute centre, creates its organic canvas.

Such misinterpretations and misconstructions are coherent, but only following the logic of the Romanian phenomenon, because the distance between structuralism and our criticism is a distance of perceiving the entire literature. By exposing the naturalisation of institutions and the postulation of language artificiality, structuralism was actually completely out of touch with the ideology of our literary men during the sixties. During a stage chiefly optimistic, of reconstruction of the literary institution, the dissolution of the subject, of the author or of literature itself had no meaning. Following a period of profound “conventionalisation” of the literary (all possible “deconstructions” of the literary field had been undertaken with us, as concretely as possible, during the fifties), Romanian writers will not try to render it relative, but, on the contrary, to stimulate it superiorly. The main, almost instinctive target was to rebuild the vital, quasi-natural relationship between culture and

subject. Hence, the metaphors of deconstruction, mortification, decline or inkhorn sterilisation (“death”, “dissolution”, “decentre”) are left in favour of the expressions of organicism, of the auroral, the unlimited possibilities (“total criticism”, “open work”, “necessary polyvalence”). Radically linguistic movements resulting from the “New Criticism”, during the second part of the sixties, would stand no chance at striking roots precisely because they would postulate the decentring of literature itself in favour of the term “text”. The ’60s culture – and perhaps the entire culture under communism – focuses around the former humanist tradition, recently revived, of the “literature” and of the “book”. A subsequent study should clarify whether names established during the seventies, less engaged in the canonical battle of liberalisation, such as Eugen Negrici, Marin Mincu, Ioana Em. Petrescu or Livius Ciocârlie, or reformed Sixties representatives, such as Adrian Marino or Paul Cornea, would manage to create (convincingly) within critical paradigms different from Călinescu’s.

Closer to the field of the Sixties representatives is the so-called thematist group of the New French Criticism. Georges Poulet, Jean Starobinski or Jean Rousset (preceded by Marcel Raymond or Albert Béguin) would postulate the immanence of literature without asserting violently its separation from the subject. The focus on the subtle relationships between conscience and creation, the preference for an “analytical criticism”, paying attention to text inflexions without slipping on the side of linguistic technicalities, the search of signification in what is hidden in the creation (fascination with the underlying layer) constitute renewing principles that, nonetheless, do not shatter the traditional manner of criticism. Hence, they will be received almost unanimously by the Sixties representatives.

The miraculous civilisation of the critical book, which emerges starting with 1967, constituting the zero time of an actual “criticology/ science of criticism” (C. Regman), is founded on a *sui generis* composition of Călinescu-type approach and the New French Criticism, together with its existentialist or thematist group. After almost two decades during which the elementary idea of critical op had been destroyed (i.e. trimmed down to a collection of articles or to a study in which traditional historiography positivism would be a shield for Marxist-Leninist determinism), it re-emerges under the general programme of the “essay”, now theorised by the entire Romanian criticism as an absolute form of the freedom of interpretation. The “essay” opposed to the ideology-impregnated monograph would denote a different order and other priorities in the rhetoric of a volume, favouring the “pure criticism” had in view by the Sixties generation, but on which they could not talk freely. The central principle of the reconstruction of a monograph vision purged by ideological mechanic features, partially taken over from Călinescu, but augmented by French thematism, is that each author is the owner of an original and autonomous “universe” or “cosmos”, opposing reality, but ready to compete against it at any time. According to Negoitescu, Raicu, Manolescu, Balotă or Petroveanu’s opinion, our classic writers are the creators of autonomous worlds, holders of certain fundamental experiences. The results of such decisive, radical options, their works, bear primarily the value of confession. After twenty year during which literature had been downsized to a practice or to a slogan, we would see it rebuild, in the enciphered ideology of such monographs, as an integral expression of the writer’s

existence and as an example of profound commitment to “reality”. In the opinion of Romanian criticism, the autonomy of the literary creation does not stand on a stylistic or structuralist criticism, focusing on language or text individuality, but it is lighted from within by an existentialist philosophy, of the ontological fullness and of the idea that literature, to its highest degree, is life.

The intent of founding, almost demiurgically, a literature, is the final obsession of the sixties, which gives birth to all the others options and critical “themes”: confidence in the compensatory reality of literature; the pre-eminence of literature and of adequacy to the work to the detriment of discussions on criticism; the superiority complex toward theoreticians, who polish uselessly their own instruments; the argument in favour of diversity, but disproof of relativism; optimism with respect to the critic’s ability of establishing values; ambiguity between the moral responsibility resulting from such action and the fascination with critical authority (power); contradiction between the modern opening toward “renewal”/ progress and the classicist timelessness needed in order to warrant values. Even if they are not confessed as such entirely, these are the main data constituting the physiognomy of the ’60s. Ultimately, during a period of censorship and self-censorship, the secret mythology of criticism is at least as important as its open postulates.