

## Doctoral Thesis: *Marin Sorescu – the Faces of Transitivity*

**Key-words:** Marin Sorescu, Transitive Poetry, “Concrete” Poetry, Antilirism, Post-War Romanian Literature, Neomodernism, Postmodernism, “Sixtyism”, “Eightyism”, Existential Simulacra, Aesthetic Canonization, Parody, Alegory, Irony, Burlesque, Grotesque

### Abstract

A fairly simple observation validates the importance, if not even the necessity of a rereading of Marin Sorescu’s poetry (the concern of this thesis): one of the few post-war writers included in the national education canon, whose poetic creation was constantly appraised by the important critics of the period, will only difficultly find his place in the evolution of the Romanian literature. Whereas the *close readings* of Sorescu’s work generate a most varied range of (frequently contradictory) labels, critical screening gives rise most often to the fading (if not even cancellation) of the specific marks, targeting an absorption as inclusive as possible into a general pattern. Sorescu’s poems become fertile in the field attached to the display of the stylisticians’, theorists’ and even the semanticists’ instruments, but they hardly ever match the literary critics’ and historians’ analytical mechanisms. Fitted in the avant-garde of several “canonical clashes”, Sorescu’s poetry closes up the rearguard, and it is included only artificially in the winners’ panoply. The volumes he published in the seventh decade are considered decisive for the removal of the monopoly held by the socialist realism literature, but the typology of the Romanian “Sixtyism” seems to evolve in the absence of the one who wrote *Moartea Ceasului* (*The Death of the Clock*), inasmuch as the genealogy of the 1980s postmodern mutation excluded (at times harshly toned) Sorescu’s mark. The poet tends to be represented by the typical artistic example of the *canonless canonical*.

Hence, an aesthetic and contextual revision of Sorescu’s creation is required; such a reconsideration is also necessary in order to outline the less discussed aspects of his poetics, as well as – given that the writer had once become a dynamite argument of the polemics between (neo)modernists and postmodernists – in order to grasp (at least partially or selectively), in a more applied manner, the way in which literature was written and discussed after the Second World War. This is how the importance attached to the referencing of

Sorescu's work to the two post-war poetic generations in chapters I and III of the thesis is justified. Under fairly classic titles – *Marin Sorescu and Neomodernism*, respectively *Marin Sorescu and Romanian Postmodernism* –, the two sections approach equally traditional objectives: the delineation of the cultural paradigm that incorporates Sorescu's poetry and, respectively, pointing out its place and role in the evolution of autochthonous poetry. We considered that a reassessment of the principles or contexts that generated the configuration of the two artistic directions is the key to the accomplishment of this analytical objective (see subchapters *Neomodernism without Sorescu* and *Romanian Grids of Postmodernism*). Furthermore, while the author does not create a “hermetic”, “purist”, “evasive” and “elitist” poetry, he does not initiate a modernist “remake” by exalting “mysticism” and “revelation”, he would exceed the scope of his own time by undertaking a novel, even revolutionary lyrical typology, the “referential”, “narrative” and “enunciating” one. However, the involvement of protochronist considerations or terminology threatens such a critical-historical demonstration in the absence of sensible and toned clarifications on the poet's awareness of the mutation his poems would cause, on how familiar he is with the most recent Occidental artistic directions, on the permeability of his artistic ideas to the period's ideological directives, on the opening and limitations of Sorescu's conceptualizations on poetry etc. (see subchapters *Sorescu's “Anti-Canons”* and *Alone among “Postmodernists”*).

The theoretical benefits of these examinations of the 1960-1980s socio-cultural background (approaching the practice of aesthetic canonization, the Generationist debates or polemics, the critical reception, but also focusing – without turning their relevance into a fetish – on auctorial self-definitions in the literary criticism or essay volumes or in the fairly numerous self-legitimizing confessions) were developed in the text commentaries of the poetical creation, screened depending on its diachronic permutations. And the cohesive aspect and analytical nucleus of the entire span of research (which faces the risk– also because of the large number of volumes signed by Sorescu – to develop horizontally) will be represented by the interpretation of the inflections and avatars of the most important element of Sorescu's poetry: the problematization of hindrances to the literary representations or, more precisely, putting on stage the clash between poetry (and human nature) and the creative crisis. This is how the thesis title, as well the titles of the chapters II and IV (representing two thirds of the paper – in fifteen, respectively five subchapters) are explained: *The Allegories of Transitivity*, respectively *The Epic of Transitivity*. Because this concept, – literary transitivity – theorized in our country by Gheorghe Crăciun, grasps adequately the perceptive-formal particularities that individualize and grant identity to Sorescu's poetics in the post-war period. Contrary to

the common belief, the transitive (“anti-lyrical”, “anti-reflexive”, “quotidian”, “reality”, “concrete”, “denotative”, “referential”, “enunciating”, “narrative”, “prosaic” etc.) poetry does not mean only a set of “positive” humanist values (differentiated from the categories of “negativity” revealed by Hugo Friedrich): the affirmation of life and immediate, common, daily, ordinary reality, the vital force, the re-humanization of art, the requirement of a new anthropocentrism, the openness toward the reader and the generality of the human nature, the democratization or re-naturalization of poetic language and discourse etc. The undermining of such a quasi-idyllic vision, the germ of its un-structuring originates in the very paradox of referentiality that characterizes any transitively marked literary discourse. Writers who challenge the insurmountable break between words and things, who attempt to go beyond the solipsism of modernist “second games” (generated by an awareness of the intransitivity of the literary language), “yearning for the return of the referent” (in Peter Brooks’s words), find it necessary to acknowledge and to relate constantly to the drastic limitations or even to the impossibility/the chimera of their own approach. While attempting to represent reality as directly as possible, they reach a point where they face self-destructively/Sisyphically both the numerous conventions that predetermine and damage the authenticity of their “representation” and the (frequently artificial) multi-stratification of the existential complex labeled “real”.

Under such an approach, Sorescu’s poetry confirms the programmatic one-dimensional character of the “Sixtyist” aesthetic canon; it is also a powerful point of reference for a potential reevaluation of neo-modernism from the perspective of an openness toward aspects suppressed particularly because of ideological, beyond-aesthetic constraints: whether we talk about the resistance to the socialist realism of the communist period or about the Generationist canonical clashes or the so-called post-revolutionary “cultural policies”. Many of the conceptual-theoretical clichés typical to the reception of the post-war Romanian literature (generalization of the relevance of purism, hermetism or evasive nature of the poetry written during the seventh and eighth decades, mystification of the post-modernist innovations generated by autochthonous “Eightyism” or the capital role held by the “east-ethical” revisionism) are substantially challenged, and even invalidated, in Sorescu’s volumes.

At the same time, his poems exemplify the coherence and complexity of one of the few Romanian poetic projects that say no to turning the creative strength of the artistic inspiration/intuition into a fetish, in order to allow its validation through a substantial theoretical-aesthetic conscience. Aware that the inter-war tradition could only be revived by representations susceptible of epigonism, living under the anxiety of the leveling influence of “socialist realism” and, above all, caught between two dominantly auroral moments in the

evolution of Romanian poetry – for not only the majority of the “Sixtyists” experience the fervor attached to the discovery of the universe and of the poetry or the freedom of communicating infinitely an expansive interiority, but the “Eightyists”, too, are validated via a founding language (irrespective of its degree of sophistication, inter-text or polyphony) that establishes fabulous worlds, bestowing infinite meanings to the real -, Marin Sorescu finds it necessary to configure the apocalyptic counterpart. His poetry will represent in a repetitive-mannerist approach both the Sisyphean attempts of the artistic to disclose more and more direct and sharp ways to describe a humanity in its turn marked by the loss of identity and the emptying of interiority, and the drama attached to the discovery of the impossibility of any type of authentic literary representation.

The dismissal of the hermetisms and abstractions of the de-humanizing modernist lyrics does not guarantee the providential establishment of a redeeming creative paradigm. The re-appropriation of the complexity of the humankind, of the new anthropocentrism, of everyday reality, of the communication and natural communion through a “democratized” poetic discourse will soon reveal its limits and insurmountable hindrances that are not eluded ingenuously by Sorescu, but are rather constantly placed in the thematic foreground of the poems. The awareness of the patent conventionalization of the artistic representation leads to varied debunking projects; however, beyond the literary-cultural sedimentation, the poet uncovers a reality in its turn affected by numerous artificial layers. Hence, the phenomenalizing or parody, burlesque or grotesque transfigurations of the classic myths, of the grand “legitimizing narratives” specific to the canonical humanity, but also the hilarious inconsistency of the new contemporary mythologizing projects. The post-modern “weak thinking” does not exert any pull on the author of *The Youth of Don Quixote*; furthermore, the atomization of metaphysics is read as a trauma rather than as a necessary ontological and gnoseological opening.

Such a thematic-ideational profile allowed me to revisit in a perhaps more applied manner the formal and rhetorical characteristics that previous critical readings considered founding of Sorescu’s poetics, style or artistic “mark”. By calling himself an anti-modernist, an incorrigible skeptic toward a present time increasingly subject to simulacra, the poet chooses fantasy representations (which transform the unusual in a natural state) in order to reflect – reversely – the lack of substance of the immediate existence. Furthermore, the (self) irony and the many parodies frequently debunk the assimilation of the mythical foundations by an inert present rather than the mythical foundations as such. I found that the creative functions acquired by Sorescu’s typical allegories and parables are even more captivating.

The mistrust and even the fear of the “empty”, agonizing words, devoid of substance because of the abusive turning of significations into clichés, determine Sorescu to substitute allegorical masks in order to suggest, at the same time, the irrepressible need of the literature to represent the humanity’s grand issues and the failure to fulfill this objective. The poetic subject or “I” is manifest by similar adjustments: despite its typical atrophy, it seeks dramatically, but pointlessly, the retrieval, as complete as possible, of a centrality it cannot reject.

Many poems written in the period '60-'90 (from the verses that precede *Singur printre poeți* (*Alone among Poets*) to the posthumous *Efectul de piramidă* (*The Pyramid Effect*)) imply the strained assertion of the undermining of the poetic subject’s founding force. Sorescu’s particularity is given by the comical clash between the ambitions of the lyrical I to establish second realities, realities that compensate a leveling reality and the revelation of the weakness or dullness of the accessible creative instruments. The utopia of knowing the laws of the universe, of one’s own interiority or otherness is often laughed at; likewise, the fulfillment and harmony sought by humanity are outlined by parody-burlesque filters. In *Poeme* (*Poems*), *Moartea ceasului* (*The Death of the Clock*), *Tinerețea lui Don Quijote* (*The Youth of Don Quixote*), *Tușiți* (*Cough*) etc. the ability of the artistic to grasp the horizons that go beyond the surface of the real is challenged. The existential or erudite materializations of the spiritual slide toward the spheres of the absurd, of the black humor, of grotesque charges or of satire (hence the title of the 1972 volume, *Suflete, bun la toate* (*My Soul, You’re Good at Everything*)). Likewise, the erotic diptych – *Descântoteca* and *Sărbători itinerante* (*Itinerant Holidays*) – does not modify decisively the coordinates of Sorescu’s poetics. Despite the formal metamorphoses, despite the reiterated affirmation of a new artistic vision, which explains the need to unleash feelings from under the influence of the “art of love”, i.e. the influence of the conventions in the erotic discourse, the new authentic approach of the erotic confession are never fulfilled. This happens because, for the “neo-modernist” poet’s lovers, “authenticity” requires a twofold “staging”: first, by opposition to the cultural patterns, and second, by detachment from the automatism required by what should be the “nature” of the erotic relation. The crisis does not mark exclusively the hyper-clichéd erotic literature, but also human sensitivity.

Thus, Sorescu separates markedly from the “fundamental biography” of the “Sixtyists”, turning into the autochthonous representative of the configuration of the literature’s frailty and weariness. Resentful against the ephemeral poetic styles (the 1950s socialist realism), but also reserved about the possibility that the apparently permanent patterns (of the inter-war modernism) should be retrieved, the poet, labeled “solar” and

“tonic” by many commentators, provides, in fact, an uneasy perspective of the art and of existence, founding – in Monica Lovinescu’s not so well-known words – “one of the most tragic universes envisaged in the Romanian literature”. Unlike the avant-garde (from where he borrows a series of poetic techniques and strategies), he does not exploit the deviation of the human nature, the dislocation of the logic and coherence of the real and of the language, the atomization of the transcendence of things in order to postulate a cleansing and a revival of the universe, but merely in order to sanction the emaciation of existence or the humankind’s utter artificiality, their strictly conventional, recurring, stereotyped acts. It is his belief that the rhetoric of evolution, of change, of progress conceals in vain an inertial collapse.

Even the subversive dimension of his poetics must be read along the lines of this “cosmologic pattern”. Undoubtedly, the “decadent shift” of the apocalyptic imaginary promoted by Sorescu validates a reading grid against the communist ideology on the new man, on the “compulsory happiness”, on utopian progress. However, for a damaged, destabilized, often dehumanized poetic subject, the desire to reconfigure the universe calls forth a utopian restoration of the human being’s centrality, hence an avoidance of his/her typical limitations. Or, the awareness of the artificiality intrinsic to such an approach dissociates the neo-modernist writer from his nearest Occidental philosophical direction: Existentialism. The captivity among cultural constructs, ideological manipulations and existential simulacra compels Sorescu to become at times demystifying or skeptic and ironic toward Camusian and Sartrean founding projects for a renewed humanity. Anti-systemic, removing the substance of anthropocentric vanities, the human nature repudiates even the revolutionary illusions. An indication is present precisely in the configuration of the protest in *Poezii alese de cenzură (Poems Selected by the Censore)*, *Traversarea (The Crossing)* or *Scrânteala vremii (The Madness of the Time)*, books in which existential anxiety attains hyperbolic sizes, while the poetic subject, a representative of the oppressed Romanian people, does not shape any salvation, but merely “sings” the destruction of the whole national identity and dignity.

And when the artistic principles mentioned are eluded, the (rather numerous) great aesthetic failures in Sorescu’s books occur. It is not the slip into mannerism – as repeatedly emphasized by critics – which is the main cause of the artistic involution of Sorescu’s work. From one volume to another, the poet manages to initiate fine tones or innovative metamorphoses of the imaginary and of the poetic style, revealing various and complex sides of his creative obsessions. I have analyzed also the occasions when Sorescu’s departure from Sorescu requires actual artistic mutations, as well as the situations in which the author

separates from his own poetics in order to write simplistic, almost nationalist poems (as in the volume *Astfel (Thus)*) he would have parodied once or texts that disappoint because of the textualist games based on a language that draws almost exclusive attention to its apparently fascinating combinations. The deviation of the human essence and the lack of transcendence of the real become both inauthentic and empty of existential tension. In such cases, Sorescu is the representation of a poet fully certain that his art can recreate the world; it can represent life's grand issues, it can have access to his and the others' interiority. At ease in the poetic formulas that earned him his fame, juggling his own creative patterns, he is not at all touched by the pressure of previous, contemporary or personal literary conventions and he uses the everyday life absurd or burlesque scenarios for their humoristic worth, while the meta-textual and inter-textual inserts seem mere literary prestidigitations.

Artistic successes and failures – as I attempted to prove in all the chapters of the thesis – are typical, to a great extent, to a (neo)modernist. Sorescu does not undertake a completely different creative paradigm, despite his many separations from the lyrical practice of the “Sixtyists”. The future theoretical approaches of the seventh decade poetry will simply have to acknowledge more markedly the importance of the literary direction checked by Sorescu in that period. Because autochthonous neo-modernism holds a substantial problematization of the limitations and apocalypse of the human heritage, whose disclosure – for various reasons (partly examined in this paper, too) – has been eluded constantly by the Romanian exegesis.

Consequently, the act of relating Sorescu's creation to the so-called Romanian poetic postmodernism – including episodes that are at times comical, and at other times melodramatic or conceptually/theoretically coherent – was inescapable. I decided to analyze separately (in the fourth chapter) the *La Liliaci* cycle, since these volumes were – chiefly – points of reference for the critical revisions or canonical fights initiated by the exegetes of the “Eightyist” generation. In order to be able to accommodate Sorescu, the meanings of modernism become fluid and more heterogeneous than ever before, while the dawn of postmodernism is identified by Nicolae Manolescu or Eugen Simion during the first years of the seventh decade. Then again, Mircea Cărtărescu, Gheorghe Crăciun, Ion Bogdan Lefter and Caius Dobrescu see in the author of *La Liliaci* nothing more than a “delayed modernist” who contributes to the stagnation of the national literature's development. Moreover, when reference to his work can no longer be eluded, the fading or challenging of its artistic influence is justified by axiological minimizing rather than by evaluations of form and of poetic vision. On the one hand, the critical vocabulary grows unexpectedly liberal, generating a series of incontestable conceptual victories; on the other hand, the obtuseness of the

interpretive criteria of some of the most “democratic” Romanian exegetes becomes obvious. Postmodernism becomes a strictly Generationist socio-cultural product, holding a history and a morphology that depend on literary-critical strategies, tactics and assaults managed depending on varied canonical revisions.

While reexamining “the file” of the reference of Sorescu’s poetics to postmodernism or to transitive poetry, I understood the necessity – beyond the theoretical-terminological debates and speculations – of a more applied reevaluation of the structure of texts in which the exegetes included Sorescu’s poetic projects. I started a series of micro-analyses of several volumes or poetic cycles placed by critics in the line of *La Lilioci* and included in the series of the poetry of the “real”, of the “everyday life”, of the “prosaic”. Even if it uses mainly a transitive language, despite the many procedures that seek to disclose the artificiality of the strategies of artistic “transfiguration”, the “concrete” poetry promoted in the Romanian literature of the seventh and eighth decades reveals a paradoxical referencing to the real, playing on the discovery in the everyday life of the magic-fantastic universes, of technological simulacra or of the idyllic redeeming potentialities. The neo-modernist process of redeveloping and recording the preeminence of the poetic “I” is resumed just when its accomplished nature is anathematized more explicitly.

Nonetheless, many years before, Sorescu had proposed in *La Lilioci* a completely different direction, whose opportunities were not assimilated, unfortunately, by our writers. The poetic cycle begun in 1973 is, perhaps, the most innovative and complex autochthonous project meant to solve the aporias of literary transitivity: on the one hand, the fact that, irrespective of the number of debunking, non-conformist and eccentric approaches required, all the artistic representations end by becoming subject to another limiting set of creative patterns, distorting irremediably the contact with the reality, on the other hand, the fact that everyday life seems irretrievable since the many artificial layers stuck together by the repeated metamorphoses of modern existence are categorically perverted.

Certain that many cracks can be unveiled in the existential simulacra, that the world can be reflected beyond erudite constructs by facing it with the library’s eternally reversed spyglass, the poet suggests a sort of modesty of literature when dealing with the complexity of the humankind. Year in, year out, Sorescu represented in an ironic, parody, burlesque manner the last twitches of the poetic in his dramatic-Sisyphean approach of the authentic problems of a universe about to dissipate. It is only with *La Lilioci* that the poet manages to identify also the first workable alternatives. Aware that the normal side of existence, in order to be shared, cannot be discovered, but must be reclaimed, he begins seeking a softened subjectivity, which

would be hidden in the shadow of the voices that contact directly the existential immediacy: the child, the mother, the villagers. However, the decisive factor is the intervention of the “poet-reader”, who must detect (by proper placement in the textual-poetic background) the elements that are actually important for the daily existence. He is going to signal by comical dramatizations, and even to sanction through irony or debunking (satirical included) assaults the potential hindrances to the configuration of existential normality, irrespective of its variegation. I dare say that no other post-war Romanian writer had an aesthetic (and partially political) nerve similar to the one shown in *La Liliaci* in order to reach the final limits of carrying the transcendent into the mundane, the reification of the existential routine and the complex process of renewing the validation of the regularity of existence.

The popular Sorescu problematizes limits of or hindrances to the literature that are inaccessible even to the subtlest poets or critics, Sorescu the iconoclast conceals, instead of an iconophile, a post-Nietzschean skeptical of the providential revelations that could stem from certain demystifying approaches, while Sorescu the humorist, the parodist, the ironic, the fantasist discloses by hiding, in an allegory-parable style, the dramatic emptying of the substance held both by literature and by humanity.