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## **STRUCTURALIST MODELS IN POST- WAR ROMANIAN CRITICISM**

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**Summary:**

Stated in such terms, the present subject of research seems to prefigure certain dead-ends. From the very start, one might assert that it is highly impossible to circumscribe within Romanian literary studies – either in current literary criticism or within the academic field - a programmatic structuralist trend, as was the case of Eastern and Western European movements. The fact is that the Romanian post-war case involves a foreign model (generally, the French one) and the subsequent tensions or distortions in reception could easily end up in a comparative table risking to say nothing of any of the parties.

Even more important should be a terminological reticence: since the post-war structuralism took shape in a multidisciplinary environment, in other fields than the literary ones, where it was only subsequently transplanted (social sciences, mathematics, linguistics represent far and close models), the issue of a „structuralist criticism” is improperly stated as such. After all, the autonomy of literary criticism is not a question of symbolic negotiation, nor does it belong to a certain type of rethorics (“anti-methodological”), but it simply concerns the natural division of labor in the field of intellectual disciplines. Since, compared to other theoretical types, structuralism mostly approaches a „scientific” order of intelligibility, its significations risk to disappear completely if regarded from the perspective of criticism, which remains a volatile and essentially “literary” domain. In fact, the major proposal of structuralism in literary theory was that of an integrated science of literary discourse, namely poetics; since its objectives were meant to be distinct from the practical action of interpretation and

valorization, literary criticism should not interfere with structuralist poetics but within strictly defined limits and rules of the theoretical game.

Indeed, if we were to consider just the literary field, we might observe that foreign structuralist schools posed issues of theoretical generality (such as „poetics”, „science of literarity”, „narrative invariants”), which had little or no critical relevance. It is by no chance, in the Francophone case, that the actual literary analysts, subsumed, for a while, to the same denomination of the *Nouvelle Critique*, rose outside the Parisian environment (for instance, the phenomenological Geneva School). On the contrary, in post-war Romania, as a consequence of the relative political liberalization, literary criticism acquires pragmatic ascendancy and symbolic capital within other Humanities, it is revigorated and diversified whereas domains such as philosophy or sociology succumbed or remained pervaded by doctrinaire requirements. That kind of ascension entailed a certain disproportion between critical action and speculation. Starting from the half of the 60s, Romanian literary criticism becomes a living organism, a work-in-progress, with personality and personalities, with a force of refraction of extrinsic ideas undoubtedly triggered by its own historical weakness.

On the other hand, the prime model of structuralism (namely, the French one) is so much endowed to its own local and intellectual context, that to evaluate its Romanian reception might not go further than the mere establishment of irreconcilable differences between two cultures, each with its distinct spiritual physiognomy. Indeed, the mismatching of the post-war Romanian cultural system and the French structuralism, in terms of ideologies and critical thinking, is none but too evident. More specifically, it comes of a double intellectual barrier: on the one hand, the doctrinaire discourse (deviated, by bureaucratic ways, from the Marxist theory and reinterpreted in nationalist terms after 1971) blocks the connotations of a purely intellectual Left and thus regards structuralism as epiphenomenon of Western decadence and technocracy; on the other hand, the critical discourse, which had already assumed the urge of autonomy, reaches only the analytical, „interpretive” valencies of the French „new criticism”. To the speculative core of structuralism – of anti-substantialist, anti-metaphysical type – our culture remains opaque, not only because of the communist screen, but also due to the frailty of its aesthetic field, which literary criticism was supposed to protect, in a totalitarian context.

But in spite of the clash of ideological and/or critical principles, the diffusion of structuralist theories profits by a time coincidence: the French movement gains European notoriety exactly at the time when the Romanian communist regime allows a relative cultural liberalization. Structuralism catches thus a propitious editorial moment and is popularized through press articles, translations, anthologies etc. Ideological publicists have their own share in taming and disseminating the idea, in separating the structuralist „philosophy” of its „praxis”, the „method” of the „analysis”, finally – in adjusting structuralism to literary parameters. Such factors explain why the reactions of rejection do not exclude the amplitude of the structuralist thematics, the extension of its vocabulary and of the intellectual debates trying to adjuce the background model, why the discredit coexists altogether with the vogue. Around the turn of the 70s, the anti-structuralist rethorics is dominant, from the level of theoretical editions to the noisy field of cultural reviews. Outside specialized areas (linguistics, ethnology, academic stylistics), structuralism seems, therefore, to be mainly diffused as a kind of white noise, in the discourse of its popularizers and detractors.

In this respect, structuralism somehow appears in the Romanian critical field as a phantom-method about which everybody is talking, but which nobody fully assumes. The unknown elements of this paradoxical equation open certain challenging tracks in the history of Romanian literary criticism, so the more as they cannot be solved by mere one-to-one comparison. „Structuralism” can thus become a revealing filter of the intrinsic profile of Romanian criticism and of its behavior in a historical moment which sometimes required extraordinary measures of adjustment. In terms of the sociology of reception (not also entirely according to its perspective), we might say we assume the criterion of the produced effect, not that of fidelity to source. In other words, we take into account the specificity of Romanian critical needs to which structuralist ideas respond or which they fail to confirm.

Such an approach of Romanian criticism cannot be conceived frontally, but in a step-by-step manner. In the communist period, the Romanian Humanities register several waves of structuralism - in linguistics, ethnology, history of literary language, academic stylistics - which come to touch literary criticism only by far resonance. Compared to the multidisciplinary of the French model, the Romanian structuralism was confined to the

domains of "linguistics" and "literary studies" (to which „mathematical poetics" can also be inscribed). Even so, its dynamics was dispersive, engaging several institutions, be them pedagogical, academic, properly critical or even ideological.

All in all, the structuralist theme can be seen as a privileged post of observation, as it is situated at the intersection of at least three types of discourse: ideological, academic (and/or pedagogical) and critical, between which there are multiple contaminations, demarcations, dependances. For instance, if, in principle, the holistic nature of structuralism clashed with the ambitions of the same type of socialism, the latter could not but take advantage of the "scientist" isolation of its specialists or of the school mass. Moreover, even if it does not fit the impressionist taste characteristic of the 60s, structuralism is also interpreted according to the stakes of the Romanian literary criticism, in terms of defining and establishing the confines of the aesthetic principle. An unprecedented fusion takes place in our academic environment between the domains of linguistics and literary studies, in both directions: academic criticism searches for "objective" methods of analysis, while linguistics, in its turn, tend to get close to literary studies. So, even if it cannot be localized as a compact and homogeneous trend, structuralism is involved in several philological fields and multiple areas of debate and eventually triggers off an internal reshaping of post-war Romanian literary criticism. Such a discursive and eventually dispersive point of view corresponds to the nature of the material analysed, ranging from linguistic studies to critical essays and press debates.

The evaluation of this intellectual thematic, mostly visible since the 70's, needs to be completed by the recomposing of the academic linguistic and stylistic research, a complex "analytical" movement based on the transfer of method and terminology. Thus, linguistics and ethnology are, starting with the mid 60's, dominated by the concepts of structuralism in its various forms (Czech, Danish, French) and remain under this influence until towards the end of the 80's, being very little open to sociological approaches, contextual approaches and others. Although unrelated to the movements in literary criticism, the paths of these disciplines are important to our research as they are able to explain a tendency towards the positiveness of literary studies (on this level), organically accomplished intra-institutionally through the fusion of the fields "language-literature" and the interconnected circulation of structuralist concepts. For example,

linguistic stylistics, transported in the new field of history of literary language, based on the soviet model, would almost exclusively favor the fictional style, ignoring other functional styles. This would become the ground for incipient structuralist issues, concerning the circumscription of literary invariants, stylistics naturally aiming towards poetics. On the other hand, but in the same direction, the linguists test their concepts in “text analysis”, a genre threatened by inflation throughout the 80’s and 90’s, pedagogically supported and editorially perpetuated. Owing much to Roman Jakobson’s influence, processed more through his analytical practice and less through his theories, linguistics gets closer to literary studies, cohabitating with stylistics and poetics. The fact is proven by generations of researchers with a double specialization, an intense production of “text analysis” and results in the inertial rolling of structuralist models, to which, beginning with the mid 80’s, generativist and semiotic models are added.

The academic journey of structuralism is, to a great extent, parallel to that of current literary criticism. However, at the beginning of the 1960’s, an important filiation, slowly activated by our criticism, can be identified. It is first put into light by the experience of The Bucharest Cercle of Poetics and Linguistics, which brought together ethnologists, linguists, and literature experts in a formalist-structuralist frame of argumentation. The model of text analysis practiced here is not initially assimilated in literary criticism, although, a few years later, it will be introduced directly in primary and secondary education pedagogy. Nevertheless, the moment of the Cercle anticipates a readjustment of literary criticism according to its internal models: situated in a *vantage point* between the fields of “linguistics” and „literary studies”, Tudor Vianu catalyses a positive exegetic direction, confirmed not just in the field of academic stylistics, but also in current criticism as well. The continuity of the model can undoubtedly be found outside structuralism as well, but the majority of negotiations of literary critics with this method (as illustrated by Sorin Alexandrescu, Mihai Zamfir, Al. Călinescu) reactivates the suggestions of the author of *Arta prozatorilor români*. These suggestions, generated by a non-structuralist theoretical horizon and ultimately characterized by moderation, also manage to attenuate the radicalism of the new theories. Therefore, the reading of French structuralism, from the end of the 60’s, brings forth milder exegetic tendencies in our criticism. The moderate structuralism, critically personalized, also has a “formalist”

coloring (not necessarily through its theoretical sources, but through its focus upon the text) and traces its origins in an organic vision of the literary, unwarily adhering to a certain Eastern-European “ontological” tradition.

The Romanian critics’ negotiations with structuralist methods during the 70s and the 80s must be considered in regard to such local models (concerning either academic stylistics reshaped in linguistic terms or the symbolic paternity of Tudor Vianu) which come to relativize foreign theories. However, in types of critical approaches ranging from statistically influenced stylistics (Mihai Zamfir) to narratology and semiotics of reception (Eugen Negrici) or telquelism (Livius Ciocârlie), with a detour in Russian formalism (Al. Călinescu), our critics close to structuralism did not practice a homogeneous method. Their initiatives were particular and they had no programmatic or polemical unity: the political conjunctures solidified the Romanian critical body beyond the seemingly diverse analytic techniques, made it define itself in terms of continuity rather than of rupture. The self-protective lens of the Romanian intellectual environment weakened the hard assumptions of the Western structuralism, rendering it not as a discourse upon cultural constructs, but as a mere interpretive technique.

Of course, the acception we give to the term of „structuralism” is, in such contexts, one partially of compromise. This stems from the fact that linguists, stylists, review critics or doctrinaire publicists each meant something else by the given term (for instance, ”philosophy”, ”vocabulary”, „method” – notions which are not entirely correspondent). Moreover, the positive tendencies from Romanian literary studies, due to the close linguistic model, are similar to certain types of formalism (such as the Russian or the Anglo-American ones), rather than to the model of French structuralist poetics. We kept, however, the respective term (also in the title) because around its semantic core gather several types of institutional and critical discourse. Shortly, it is (it was) the word of actuality, even if several things were meant by it.

The first and the ultimate purpose of the present research is to investigate the influence and the efficiency of structuralism in the Romanian literary criticism. In the light of causes already exposed, the paper is obliged to assume the risk of certain parentheses. These do not regard, however, the evaluation of the structuralist method per se (if there is actually a single one), an issue that the considerable foreign bibliography on

the matter has already widely discussed. Nevertheless, the Romanian type of structuralism should be revisited, at least because it does not fit into the aforementioned bibliography. Romanian structuralism gave rise to a conflicting, but also sentimental narration of ideas, caused panic and few adhesions, took the shape of a "ghost-story", with theoretical specters and illusions of "objectivity", eventually led to open ends. Especially in what concerned academic and pedagogical fields, structuralism and semiotics had undoubtedly negative consequences, as they resulted in a theoretical inertia which impeached the access of open paradigms, such as cultural studies or theories of reception.

But in spite of the generalized misreading of the original theories or the multiple types of reactions they generated, structuralism was also productive in our intellectual areas, not only in futile debates, but also in new ideas, assumed partially, unintentionally or, on the contrary, truly spectacular in argumentation. As a matter of fact, the difficulty for the French structuralism to be assimilated as such in the Romanian literary system did not exclude the lateral productivity of the given model. This fact can be seen on the sometimes contradictory couples of ideas in which it appeared: for instance, structuralism met the systematic spirit and the idea of literary synthesis, was associated with the idea of a nondogmatic sociology, with the historicism reshaped in synchronic terms and it eventually extended its influences within a literary creative program: the textualist movement of the 80s. The theoretical idea has thus gone the way of stronger aestheticization. Although rather inconstant from a strictly methodological point of view, the structuralist model has had a long life in our intellectual environment, if we were to think only at the way literature looked like in schoolbooks, before the reforms of the 90s. In relation to this longevity, we should underline here a matter of terminology: the paper also discusses certain aspects of semiotics within academic research and literary criticism; not because it would be impossible to dissociate structuralism and semiotics, but because in the Romanian context, the two types of theories coexisted ambiguously within the same discourse; moreover, the model for our literary criticism being also predominantly French, semiotics stemmed from the same intellectual roots as structuralism.



This transversal reading tries to cover a part of the history of Romanian critical ideas, by coordinating the contextualist perspective (regarding the symbolic forces of the Romanian intellectual field, the nature of cultural debates etc.) with a micro-analytic and metacritical approach, closely following the substance of individual or collective critical projects. The latter are being treated in separate chapters, under the form of case studies (the Bucharest Cercle of Poetics and Stylistics, Sorin Alexandrescu, Mihai Zamfir, Al. Călinescu, Eugen Negrici, Livius Ciocârlie, Marin Mincu). On the whole, the paper advances chronologically, covering the period of the 60s, 70s and 80s, but most chapters are rendered in a kaleidoscope-like order, around a dominating theme of debate. The structure of the paper is also concentric: for instance, we discuss the ideological conjunctures in the first chapter in order to point out the relativity of the notion of „structuralism” which we assume.

Even if extended in proportions, the structuralist theme remains rather second or, at least, it is relativized on the whole of post-war Romanian literary criticism. Nevertheless, the fields in which it was involved and reshaped, the cultural and symbolical constructs with which it interacted or clashed, all in all – the diffusive manner in which it manifested itself confirms its pertinence as a point of analysis of the Romanian critical discourse.

