

PERPESSICIUS: Life and Work. A Critical Study

KEY-WORDS: critical and literary study, identification and valorisation of documents, the revelatory nature of documents, the becoming in time of the man and of the writer, development of the critical ego, paidetic approach, biographical interpretation, literary reflection of a sentimental, structuring of a genuine *homo aestheticus*

To understand the complexity of researching the life and work of Perpessicius, it is enough only to refer to the chapter titles of the present paper.

Our study is an effort in literary history, one that brings in its support some arguments for a possible biographical interpretation. In fact, these are arguments lying at the basis of the analysis of a destiny itself and of a work of an undeniable originality. For, we are faced here with an exceptional writer and critic who wanted to be always in the midst of historical events, through which, by force of circumstance, he defined himself. Our research has followed his chronological evolution, highlighting the way in which “The Critic Enters Through the Years, in the Foreground of Romanian Literature”. On the other hand, we have taken into consideration his quality as a “Witness and Participant in a New History” in the aftermath of World War II, drawing special attention on his initiatives embodied in the Museum of Literature, as well as its publication, *Manuscriptum*. We have followed the worldly course of this exceptional scholar and, for this matter, we have walked “On the Steps of an Untreatable Sentimental”. Analyzing his presence in “His Moment in History”, we have constantly taken into consideration that Perpessicius put himself for “One Half of Century in the Service of Romanian Literature”, a literature he served in his quality as a critic and literary historian, but also as a writer, even if in this last stance he was noticeably more of a poet and less of a narrator, as

he would have wanted to be.

Viewed from the perspective of his own time, Perpessicius's life imposes, before anything else, through its own effort to escape – as C. Noica would say – the simple becoming into becoming and thus to set for itself a different goal and a different finality. For, if up to one point the critic seems to be following a path not so much different in its general-human predispositions from the one dictated by the law of the species to any common individual, the moment he starts to stand out more determinedly, his life changes its inner registry in such a subtle way that it leaves the impression it has been almost entirely confiscated by his passion for reading and writing. Some of the scholar's own confessions come to support this observation, and they must be taken into account because they underline, at the end of a career, *a way of being* to which Perpessicius subscribed as early as his youth, even if, for the years to come, he might have had plenty of reasons to regret the step he had taken. How sincere this was remains to be seen, since he still consented to pursue the previously chosen path all the way through.

Besides, it was the only option that could have engaged him with his own creative destiny in such a determined way. In this fashion, destiny forced the writer to enclose, willingly or unwillingly, His Life in His Work. Consciously agreeing on his new condition, he would want to confer it, implicitly, an identity more fitting to particularize it, unable to foretell that the pseudonym he had adopted would soon become the very measure of his life – indeed, one paved with difficulties and tested through suffering.

These will undoubtedly affect Perpessicius, but they will also vanish in front of his irrepressible passion for literature. For, having assumed the position of the chronicler, he took on the role of a modern-day Sisyphus, compelled by his own status to take up, again and again, the work for which he was, by nature, destined. By reading and making public his impressions on the works of his contemporaries on a weekly basis, the critic must have felt from the very beginning that writing was also the only ordeal that could save him.

A reconstruction of his existence, from the perspective of its creative dimension, would therefore be more than plausible, as it could bring us closer not only to its most profound aspect, but also to its regenerative element. Yet, it would also depart us from the complexity that characterizes the totality of its manifestations. Thus, we consider it necessary to also appeal to the energy lines that contributed, one way or another, to the structuring of this exceptional personality on a human, moral and intellectual scale. In fact, this would also enable us, to the greatest extent possible, to make his vital beat heard. For, even if he directed almost all his energy in the direction of the Work that was meant to represent him, Perpessicius never intended to be seen as a recluse, abstracted from the reality and turmoil of his age. The one who would relegate himself to the world of books at night, would go out in the forum by day – and not just to exercise his duty as a teacher, but also to acknowledge and to immerse in the greater issues of his City. This is corroborated, amongst other things, by his numerous contributions as a journalist. In fact, there was no urgent daily issue that would not engage him and to which he would not respond properly. Under such circumstances, the critic frequently reveals his fighter nature too, since, just like his fellow citizens, he will feel in his time much too offended in his civic and political ideals not to confront the inequities and unnaturalness of a world too often inclined to listen only to questionable mores. Furthermore, we can't exclude the possibility that deep down, like the old Caragiale, he was carrying the nostalgia of the same “established society”, which, through its own mechanisms, was able to rectify a random course and thus to re-inscribe itself into the laws of a certain normality.

The contact with the quotidian allowed Perpessicius, to a certain extent, to leave behind the solitude inherent to the creative act and to face his own century with passion and lucidity. And even though he did not adhere to its narrow pragmatism, he was nevertheless concerned with understanding its history and with pinpointing, in consequence, its initiatives, whenever they would so much as get close to his humanistic credo.

In any case, the critic appeared to be seduced by the idea of a world in which work, in any of its manifestations, would have to represent its supreme reason to be. In this respect, his view was relatively close to the one expressed by Tudor Vianu in his *Aesthetics* (though more categorically and through a more subtle argumentation). It is, in fact, within the limits of this belief that we should place Perpessicius's repeated calls addressed to his contemporaries to serve their talent through maximum creative efforts. And under no circumstances did he renounce to this goal, even though he knew that through his attitude he could disturb small egos and stir human vanities.

Yet, the chronicler rarely picked up the gauntlet. And if he could find in himself the strength to overcome, with a condescending smile, the sometimes uncouth reactions of his fellows, he did so precisely because he esteemed and loved the writers of his time, with all their faults. That is why he labored himself to understand their literary creations and to focus on its achievements. The man who appeared to be enslaved only by the beauty of art did not, however, despise the simple pleasures of life. The desire to engage with the community often pushed him toward comradeship, turning him into a pleasant conversation partner, during the long hours of chit-chat at the "Capșa", or in the lines he would respectfully put on paper, in his ample correspondence. His big heart allowed him, in fact, to cultivate and entertain long-term friendships – not only with the writers of his time, but also with other fellow beings.

His largely sympathetic inclination toward the world and humans appeared to have a word to say also in those rare moments when he left himself be touched by the arrows of the mischievous Eros. For, unbelievable as it may seem, the critic was not at all insensitive to the eternal feminine beauty. The lyrical parentheses of his mature years would often take on the shape of hard to ignore confessions. We should not forget that the verses which were to popularize his pseudonym in Gala Galaction's *Cronica* had been encouraged by one of his transitory love affairs. The latter make their presence felt in his lyrical "itineraries", as well as in a number of passages in his

novels. For, no matter how hard the writer would try to conceal them through the more ethereal notes of the imagination, they get too much carried away by their own passion to not leave the impression of moments that were experienced in a most human way. This is, of course, a mere assumption, and it need to be taken with a pinch of salt, especially because by his own internal constitution Perpessicius was inclined to consume his passions with almost complete discretion. Most often veiled in absolute secrecy, his “love affairs” nevertheless provide us with the image of a man forever in love – even though the Eve who had once set him on fire proved to be more interested in the creator, rather than the man he was in actuality. This is, in fact, confirmed by his original “Sylvan Journal”, which came to represent, at the turning point of his life, a subtle Chekhovian pretext for him to go on talking about another love affair – illicit yet no less platonic – which for him most likely had the strength and scent of fine spirits. This is because for Perpessicius what is important is not the carnal fulfillment of erotic passion but, rather, the possibility to remain in the virtuality of its unparalleled ideality. The “excuse” he could have brought up to justify his brief “wanderings” contains, in essence, a truth that we, pharisees, are inclined to ignore and thus forget that “Love dwells within ourselves (...) and remains in us, with its obsessive and painful presence, long after the simoun has ravaged, covering under its sand dunes all the pathways of the past...”.

We have also insisted upon this so-called “secret” facet of Perpessicius’s personality, so as to further draw attention to the fact that his life cannot be contained within a single frame. That is why, to be interpreted in the fairest possible manner, it must be reconstituted first, step by step, and in stages. For only by playing every keynote of its manifestations can we have the chance to restore it in its entire and profound humanity.

In effect, his very existence unfolds along two registers: a diurnal one, dictating him, everyday, the rhythm he would follow in the forum, and a nocturnal one, prevailing that of meditation and writing. This is also the time when he could return to himself with more dedication, to meditate upon the events of the day and to take

note of them in his intimate journal entries, or to ignore them deliberately, thus giving himself the time to deliver, the next morning, the sequel he had promised to produce.

The rhythm he imposes upon himself in his capacity of a creator is not, however, so draconian as to not allow him to slip onto his manuscript page at least some benignly ironic allusion regarding the facts or events he took part in and experienced, directly or indirectly. His chronicles provide us in this respect with enough proof, since their pages are oftentimes filled with casual words of discontent or reproach concerning the rather loose dynamics of the literary phenomenon or the conduct of some of his fellow beings.

Nevertheless, discretion and a certain shyness compel him to muffle his own reactions to some extent. For, the critic manages to remain urban by all means, in any of his public expressions, even if the attitude of some of his brethren might ask for a harsher response.

In fact, the latter can be retraced in his writings, though it is more poignant in the rather precipitated notes of a journal that has been kept secret for a long time. In the dim light of the oil lamp, and later of the lampshade, the critic finds the opportunity to fully open his heart and to renounce to the velvety touch of his usual ornate style so that he can speak about things as they are. In such moments, the difference in wording and attitude is sometimes so prominent that we might be tempted to believe there are two sides to Perpessicius's existences. For, there is one dimension that characterizes his existence in the forum and an almost entirely different one that takes shape during his hours of solitude spent at his writing desk.

His reactions tend to somehow dismiss the image of an Alexandrine writer overly concerned with style and perhaps caught up for too long in a century of classical expression. It is, in fact, this kind of mannerism that he himself would denounce, ridiculing himself mainly because he was aware of having used, at times, a mask that in reality he had not wanted for himself. And all this because the writer wanted to be, by all means, a figure of his own time.

The truth is that his daily notes – the few that have been preserved – , as well as the numerous and often acrid interventions of the journalist are able to restore him to us more faithfully, as a man and creator firmly anchored in his day and age. For, there isn't a more prominent event or fact in its history that he would not take note of, so that, even though his opinions were, until recently, meant to remain hidden from other eyes, such things still survive as the testimony of an intellectual who chose not to pass through his own century with indifference.

What is more interesting and raises some problems in his case is the double standard he uses to gratify some of his contemporaries. For, if on the page to be printed he leaves the impression, for instance, that he is one of Nae Ionescu's unconditional admirers, in his secret notes the critic can barely find a word of praise for the latter's public attitude.

This existence along two registers gave him the chance to be in tune with his own age. This is because no matter how much he would have been tempted to escape into the imaginary world of the books, Perpessicius remains, nonetheless, firmly anchored in the reality of his period, even if he would not always agree its mode of existence. This is, in fact, what explains to some extent why he behaves under certain circumstances in a manner peculiar to a *homo duplex*. For, he displays one state of mind at dawn and in the social field, and often a quite different one in the moments when he is sitting all alone at his writing desk. The man who wanted for himself too "a tolerant and libertarian democracy", couldn't ignore the rigors imposed on him, through a tacit convention, by community. Hence the tendency to use protective gloves in his relationships with fellow beings. It's only that these fellow beings got to irritate and disappoint him all too often, for him not to blame them at least in his own intimacy. His correspondence and the Journal start, whatever one might say, not only from the necessity of replacing a real moment of chatting, but also from the inner need to repost facts and habits, which in public he cannot disclose at once, but which he, like another Procopius of Caesarea, still wants to make known, even in death. This is the peculiar mode of being of a man who wants to experience his history to

the fullest, but not to such an extent as to be unable to distance himself from it, whenever necessary.

We would be besides the truth or, rather, we wouldn't be in line with it, if we overly insisted on this kind of attitude, ranking it as a vital principle. Perpessicius's spirit is in reality more complex and to measure his existence only along the coordinates of some continuous dissimulation would mean to separate it from its very essence. For, what truly stands out beyond its diverse manifestations is precisely the unbiased inclusion of life and the world. And this is built upon a real and nuanced understanding and also on a tolerant attitude that allows itself to be selective, so as not to include between its limits the gestures and facts that become reproachable by their own nature. For, these kinds of attributes helped him to take in, as humanly possible, the pulse of the century and to circumscribe himself in the temporal frame of the history, without paying a toll, except in the moments when compromise was inevitable. For, he was obliged in a way, as a critic, to acknowledge the often unaesthetic metamorphosis of a literature that placed itself along the years, willingly or unwillingly, too extensively and too conspicuously under the aegis of some poor political partisanship. Yet, not even in those moments would he forget that he was working on behalf of the arts, being obliged as such to remind his contemporaries that they should step out of inertia and conformity.

Through the spiritual-affective data meant to express his identity, Perpessicius's existence can be felt within the sphere of his own work, eventually managing to establish itself as its own distinctive mark. It is this distinctive mark that the critic had in mind when, speaking *pro domo*, he would remind us, through his diverse "allusions", that no work of art is alien to the experiences of its signatory. This is why, somewhat forcing the note, we would be tempted to say that, whatever the genre in which finds expression, the literature professed by the critic tends to be mainly a biographical one, even during those moments when, through the shape it has taken, it wouldn't be constrained to do so. For, if poetry seems to be obliged by nature to organize itself by the rules peculiar to any ego-maniacal sensibility, the

story and the novel structure themselves according to a different logic, even though within their space too we may encounter more personal interpretations of the reality from which they emerge.

But, beyond the aesthetic finality they might have, even more important to remember is the fact that this type of work insists on some moments of life in which its author was also involved, not only out of the simple desire to remember them, but mainly to give them the possibility to regain the meaning those very circumstances initially granted them.

Seen from this perspective, Permessicius's poems and stories, as well as a part of his essays, display the characteristics of a documentary, as they reveal the traces of a history that repeatedly brought the writer into foreground, sometimes granting him more authenticity in his own work than we could imagine in his mundane manifestations.

We can see here the paradox of any work that is shaped too much by the patterns of a life so as not to be tempted to resume them, even if reduced to the essence and in a fictional frame. Anyway, focusing on certain events that had a special meaning for him, more often than not the critic also tries to capture in their content what represents him as a writer and a human being.

In order to sketch his moral profile in the most coherent manner, it is necessary to take into account all the facts and events in which we can find at least a part of the attributes that define him. For, only by revealing the energy lines that created his personality, can we also have the possibility to see what credibly reflects his existence in the diversity of its manifestations. By doing so, we would inevitably get to other endings than those that it has granted to the public eye so far. But for this, we would need a broader vision while appreciating the aspects that could highlight the more intimate side of the critic's life as well.

Anyway, by insisting upon it, we would also have the chance to discover what is truly essential in its way of being. For only through his peculiar manifestations can we hope to reveal Permessicius in his entire humanity. In fact, through his way of

being, he forces us to observe that the same unique figure is host to the “character” capable of showing him in his public existence, but also to the more caring man, forever constrained by reality to stay in the shadow of the first. Yet, this sensible dreamer surfaces whenever life forces him to put his feelings at stake. It is also the stance that allows him to have enough maneuvering space to protect his relationships and thereby forget his love affairs. Like this, he removes the risk of putting himself in an inconvenient situation in front of the others. Because no matter how libertine he may consider himself to be, the critic prides himself on being a family man, as Mr. Iancu would say. This is why he would have the tendency to continuously weave a veil of impenetrable mystery all around him. And, in the rare circumstance when he would feel the need to confess his sins, he would chose as confidantes only those he considers closer to his spirit.

In this way, Perpessicius tends to construct for himself a personal existence more suited to his own subjectivity, but also capable of circumscribing itself, with relative ease, within the rhythms of his social existence. This is why one seems to prolong the other, even if a real communication line between the two is not always established. And this is what confers the critic’s biography an occasional Matei Călinescu-like allure, for it deliberately places itself under the “seal of mystery”, precisely to make it possible to keep its secrets untouched.