

THE LITERARY CRITIC AS A CIVILIZING HERO IN ROMANIAN POSTWAR LITERARY CRITICISM

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ABSTRACT:

This paper is concerned with the conditions and strategies contributing to the myth of the traditional literary critic as a savior of Culture itself. Originating in the Romantic idea of genius, this representation became pervasive, in Romanian literature, in the second half of the 20th century due to the political context. In *Iluziile literaturii române/ The Illusions of Romanian Literature* (2008), Eugen Negrici takes note of the various representations of the literary critic, seen often as a guiding principle, a founding father, a providential figure. Yet, Negrici fails to analyze on the one hand the amplitude of this rhetoric and on the other hand, the ideological conditions of its expansion. One of the premises of my paper is that this process of mystification is specific to Eastern semi-peripheric literatures under the control of totalitarian political regimes. A process of compensation – seen in complexes of cultural superiority or inferiority – can be detected through the scientific arguments of most of the monographic studies. Representative, in this respect, are the postwar books dedicated to the most important traditional Romanian critics: Nicolae Manolescu's *Contradicția lui Maiorescu/ The Contradiction of Maiorescu* (1970), Eugen Simion's *E. Lovinescu, scepticul mântuit/ E. Lovinescu, the Redeemed Skeptic* (1971) and Mircea Martin's *G. Călinescu și complexe literaturii române/ G. Călinescu and the Complexes of Romanian Literature* (1981). Each of the books mentioned above provides a reflection on the necessity of a directing figure, although their strategy is different: Nicolae Manolescu uses a psychoanalytical perspective in order to make Titu Maiorescu the prototype of the critical conscience, Eugen Simion accounts for Lovinescu as the main agent of all the modernizing currents of interwar literature, while Mircea Martin sees G. Călinescu as the synthesis of all the Romanian systems of criticism. All these monographic studies can be held, however, as

symptomatic for the mixture of scientific and spiritualist/mythic premises that lie behind the critical discourse specific to semi-peripheral cultures.

Keywords : literary criticism, distortions, communist cultural field, providential figure,

All over Eastern Europe, the fall of communism enabled the reconsideration and the analysis of a politically repressed culture. The majority of the studies focused on the mutations censorship had prompted on literature and on literary life, emphasising state restrictions. In Romanian context, fundamental studies such as *Literatura între revoluție și reacțiune* by Sanda Cordoș¹, *De la proletcultism la postmodernism* by Florin Mihăilescu² focused on the atypical position of the Romanian literary field, insisting on the offensive mechanisms of ideology against literature. Books that studied the repercussions of Stalinist ideology were followed by more recent research on the effects of nationalism-Ceaușism in the 1970s-1980s: *O istorie „glorioasă”. Dosarul protocronismului românesc*³ by Alexandra Tomiță and Lionel Roșca's *La umbra timpului în floare. Protocronismul: prolegomena la monografia unei idei*⁴. The incongruities of Romanian literature under communism were ascribed, therefore, to the interferences imposed by the Stalinist doctrine in the 1950s-1960s, or to the nationalist-Ceaușist intrusions that occurred in the following decades.

An overlooked aspect, however, is the fact that the defensive strategies of the liberalising forces also contributed to the deformation of the literary debates of the time. The paradox of literature under totalitarianism pushes the powers auxiliary to the autonomy of the aesthetic to opt for a series of interpretive distortions meant to

¹ V. Sanda Cordoș, *Literatura între revoluție și reacțiune* (2nd revised edition), Cluj-Napoca, Biblioteca Apostrof, 2002.

² V. Florin Mihăilescu, *De la proletcultism la postmodernism*, Constanța, Pontica, 2002.

³ V. Alexandra Tomiță, *Dosarul protocronismului românesc*, București, Cartea românească, 2007.

⁴ V. Lionel Roșca, *La umbra timpului în floare. Protocronismul: prolegomene la monografia unei idei*, Cluj-Napoca, Casa Cărții de Știință, 2012.

restore the normal course of literature. This is why I believe Romanian literature underwent two types of malformations under totalitarianism; I would label them *offensive distortions* (whose agents are the dogmatic forces), respectively *defensive distortions* (effected by the liberalising forces). Apart from the nature of the originating agents, there are, of course, essential differences between the two typologies: offensive malformations are rather factual, whereas defensive ones are symbolical. The former, detrimental *par excellence*, relate directly to censorship and they backed the disappearance of aesthetic movements and of entire generations of writers from the map of Romanian literature. The latter concerns, however, a series of overinterpretations meant to promote, compensatively, values the official ideology had banned.

These compensatory practices partially overlap the “complexes” Eugen Negrici catalogued in *Iluziile literaturii române*. In the author’s opinion, the complex of the “fragility” of literature – substantiated by (the complex of) the fragility of the national essence, constantly threatened by dissolution – created, in the Romanian culture, the premises of a “mytho-genetic effervescence”, specific to semi-peripheral literatures⁵. The unexpected aspect is that not only literature, but also the so-called positivist studies of literary history and theory are short-circuited by this mythical discourse, which “distorts the interpretive approach”. In times of historical crisis, the mytho-genetic activity surges, leading to a compensatory symbolical reality of extreme complexity⁶. Thus, the dynamics of Romanian literature under totalitarianism must be read in the context of these “complexes”.

Although it does not actually show “the place in the field of hermeneutics, of artistic theorisation and production where there are mystification and disguise or delusion”⁷, *Iluziile literaturii române* does a compelling organisation of some of the *topoi* of this mythical physiognomy of Romanian literature. “The need of steady references”, “the tabooing of national heritage”, the cult of masterpieces and of the classics (complexes that kept clinging to the modern institution of Romanian literature) are complemented by the high-flown image of the critic. Since the end of

⁵ The main features of semiperipheral literatures are described by David Damrosch, in *What is World Literature?*, Princeton-Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2003.

⁶ “The mytho-genetic act is triggered in times of (perceived) critical experiences, as a reaction of the collective psyche to the cases of historical-social fracture, of community disintegration or of unexpected acceleration of the evolutionary process” (Eugen Negrici, *Iluziile literaturii române*, București, Cartea românească, 2008, p. 7).

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 15.

the nineteenth century, the literary critic has been considered a supervisor of conscience, a founding father, a providential character capable of judging literature, as well as to create it for that matter, alongside with the writers. Nevertheless, while in most of the modern cultures directional criticism had been weakening since the first half of the last century, in Romanian context it started an unprecedented growth after the 1960s.

The objective of this study is to analyse these quasi-mythical representations of the Romanian critic, equating the ideological conditions and motivations of these symbolical amplifications. The investigation focuses on three of the most influential volumes of Romanian post-war criticism; the heart of each of these volumes is a “traditional” literary critic and historian. The study takes into consideration Nicolae Manolescu’s *Contradicția lui Maiorescu* (1970), Eugen Simion’s *E. Lovinescu, scepticul mântuit* (1971) and, last but not least, Mircea Martin’s *G. Călinescu și complexele literaturii române* (1981).

The first thing that binds them is the substantial ideological weight, although none of them actually articulates ideology matters. Each of these books is an attempt to “rehabilitate” its critic, after more than two decades of (partial or total) interdiction. Although analytical fragments about these critics’ works had been published before, their study in monographs must be read as a pioneering act none of the exponents ignores to mention more or less directly. The fact alone that one could approach again Maiorescu’s, Lovinescu’s or G. Călinescu’s work was considered an event out of the ordinary. For this reason, the stakes of the monographs exceed easily the confines of the simple re-interpretation of the classics: each of them restores the image of the critic, undertaking an almost initiatory act – that of reviving the author after wandering for a long time in the purgatory of socialist realism. In fact, the paradox is that two of these monographs are published before the republication of the critics’ important works: *Istoria literaturii române contemporane*⁸ is re-edited in 1981, while *Istoria literaturii române de la origini până în prezent*⁹ is re-edited only in 1982. Therefore, the monographers do more than speak about the works of these critics; they also speak *in their name*, in an act of symbolical reincarnation.

⁸ Eugen Lovinescu, *Scrieri*, vol. 4-5, ed. by Eugen Simion, București, Minerva, 1973.

⁹ G. Călinescu, *Istoria literaturii române de la origini până în prezent*, ed. by Al. Piru, București, Minerva, 1982.

Hence, the unconditional respect for the predecessors' work. As a matter of fact, with the exception of an open debate between Eugen Simion and Șerban Cioculescu¹⁰, the Romanian post-war criticism did not relate at all polemically to the earlier generation; they chose to emphasise the connections to rather than the breaks from it. In these monographs, the young critics declare their unconditional respect for the inter-war models. This is why all their studies resemble initiatory digressions in the masters' works; essentially, they are books of formation. In the preface, Eugen Simion states the importance of the book in the search of his own critical identity: "From among all my books, *E. Lovinescu, scepticul mântuit* has had the longest incubation. It took six years to publish it. In a way, this book shaped my critical style, it provided me with an ethical model in the literary criticism and, in the absence of a less pompous phrase, it chose my literary fate" (...) "My encounter with a great critic helped me understand myself and establish (...) a moral and intellectual model in criticism which, essentially, I haven't left yet"¹¹. Likewise, in Nicolae Manolescu's opinion, Titu Maiorescu is the actual embodiment of the critic's platonic typology: "Whenever the critics are not critics or whenever the critics are only critics, we invoke Maiorescu. To us, he is no longer a critic: he is the Critic"¹².

This particularly respectful relation to the model can be ascribed, on the one hand, to the moral repairs done to these critics, which the Stalinist culture had marginalised. Eugen Simion refers to the "far from unperturbed reception" of Lovinescu's work and, mirroring it, to the "long incubation of his own book"¹³, while Mircea Martin talks more openly about the times when "Călinescu was tolerated in the Romanian culture"¹⁴. On the other hand, the complete identification with the critical paradigm of the masters is a critical strategy of the Romanian liberalising powers. Those who, in the second half of the seventh decade, supported the retrieval of elementary principles such as "the autonomy of the aesthetic" or the "polyvalence of interpretations", could not state them openly, but filtered by the traditional critics' works. For this reason, the other name of the "autonomy of the aesthetic" became

¹⁰ For details, v. Eugen Simion, *Sfidarea retoricii. Jurnal german*, București, Cartea românească, 1985.

¹¹ Idem, *E. Lovinescu, scepticul mântuit*, 2nd revised edition, vol. I, București, „Grai și Suflet – Cultura Națională”, 1996, p. 5.

¹² Nicolae Manolescu, *Contradicția lui Maiorescu*, 2nd revised edition, București, Eminescu, 1973, p. 13.

¹³ Eugen Simion, *E. Lovinescu, scepticul mântuit*, vol. I, p. 5.

¹⁴ Mircea Martin, *G. Călinescu și „complexele” literaturii române*, București, Albatros, 1981, p. 7.

Maioreescu or Călinescu; likewise, “(catch)words” like „G. Ibrăileanu” or „Tudor Vianu” replaced the adherence to the paradigm of the “open work”. This is how the traditional critics’ work became frequently a useful instrument in the contemporary conceptual struggles. In *National Ideology Under Socialism* (1991), Katherine Verdery considers the literary field under communism from the angle of a conflict of discourses between the dogmatic (protochronist) forces and the liberalising ones, noting that their common denominator is, nonetheless, what we could call “a double-voiced discourse”¹⁵. The phrase, borrowed from Bakhtin, refers to the invocation of a foreign discourse in one’s own discourse due to the need to validate the latter. For the post-war young critics, invoking Maioreescu, Lovinescu or Călinescu constituted a way of retrieving a great part of the lost institution of criticism, without undertaking an open conflict with the communist officials. The review of inter-war writings refers indirectly – via a complex system of hints – to the case of the “mistake of values” caused by communist censorship in the 1960s. Eugen Simion’s words on Lovinescu’s fight against the dogmatic forces of the interwar period by using the Maioreescu flag is a simple *mise en abyme* of his own critical position in the field of post-war notions: “The books on Maioreescu, on his contemporaries and on his followers were written, among other things, as a reaction to what the critic calls the wave of obscurantism and the mistake of values at the end of the fourth decade and the beginning of the fifth. Lovinescu invokes Maioreescu the teacher and, in general, the great personalities of the Romanian culture, the people who founded the poetry, the prose and the criticism. He does this from his aesthetic angle, which he didn’t change for several decades, while disagreeing with many of the time’s literary groups and thought movements”. This is the context in which one needs to understand the ample mythologisation that short-circuited constantly – and quite heavily – the analytical approach of the post-war monographs. The biographic reconstructions, full of exaggerations, are representative in this respect. There is an almost invariable focus on the spirit of sacrifice and of moral responsibility that accompanies the activity of these critics from their first pages to the end of their work. The precocity and supernatural mobilisation of forces on behalf of literature itself are also constants of this discourse. To this end, a symptomatic aspect is given both by the restoration of Lovinescu’s biography, in whom Eugen Simion notices an innate critical vocation – according to

¹⁵ Katherine Verdery, *National Ideology Under Socialism. Identity and Cultural Politics in Ceaușescu's Romania*, Berkeley/Los Angeles/Oxford, University of California Press, 1991, p. 201.

the principle “one is born a critic, he/she doesn't not become one” –, and by Nicolae Manolescu's perspective on the Maiorescu's “destiny”. The conspicuous model of the construction is Sartre's book on Baudelaire, translated in Romanian in 1969. From an existentialist perspective (but going through a psycho-analytical approach), the poet's biography is seen as the final stage of his work. “Hadn' t Baudelaire wished to be a demiurge-like creator since it was his own existence that he was trying to create?”¹⁶, Sartre was asking. According to Nicolae Manolescu, the same perspective of the demiurgic drive also permeates Maiorescu's psychology. The almost complete disregard of the family, the invention of an artificial relation instead of the natural one answered to the critic's intention of being his own cause, believes Manolescu: “We can soon see that the absence of affection, the ‘rejection’ of the parents mean, at a deeper level, the rejection of anything that refers, in young Maiorescu's life, to an origin different from the one for which he alone can be accountable, which he alone had invented”¹⁷. Therefore, the spiritualised biographies, governed by the law of transforming the fortuitous into the essential, are dominants of the period.

Even the critic's philosophical ideas are analysed in connection with their capacity of reflecting Maiorescu's “personality”. In *În contra direcției de astăzi*, Maiorescu can be called a “great writer” not owing to the ideas listed, but owing to the fact that “his sense of creation explodes abruptly, openly and triumphantly”. Viewing the critic and thus eluding his system of ideas was, however, a more general practice of the era. In fact, one of the recurrent themes of the 1960s relates to the relationship between criticism and literary creation. The image of the critic as writer expands precisely because of the need to counter the typology of the political agitator disguised in literary critic. Therefore, the emphasis on the “talent” and on the stylistic qualities of the critical text (in Nicolae Manolescu's opinion, Maiorescu is a great writer even in his parliamentary speech) is a symptom of the time's defensive distortions.

This supernatural creative ability often expanded to the point of becoming a demiurgic force. Almost all of the post-war volumes on the traditional critics emphasised their capacity to create or, as appropriate, to recreate the Romanian literature from the beginning. Therefore, apart from providing the plausible criteria of

¹⁶ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Baudelaire*, translation and preface by Marcel Petrișor, Editura pentru literatură universală, Bucharest, 1969, p. 123.

¹⁷ Nicolae Manolescu, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

understanding and interpreting contemporary books, directional criticism is seen as a force capable of creating or recreating the Romanian literature as a whole. “To many, Eminescu is the work of Maiorescu”, a critic “called to reconstruct the Romanian culture”¹⁸, writes Nicolae Manolescu. In fact, in *Contradicția lui Maiorescu*, the Junimea is viewed through the Romantic rhetoric of the genius who “created the Criticism” and, “who, by constructing himself, constructed Language, Poetry, Culture”¹⁹. A type of criticism that neglects voluntarily historical contexts in favour of a trans-historical perspective, meant to maximise our critics’ providential action, contributed undoubtedly to their transformation in mythical figures. While he is not the author of the entire Romanian literature, Lovinescu becomes, in Eugen Simion’s hermenutics, the author of modern Romanian literature and criticism. This is also why “on our spiritual meridian, he becomes one with the critic’s Essence”²⁰. In a more reserved manner, Mircea Martin turns *Istoria literaturii române de la origini până în prezent* in a critical paradigm meant to reconcile the relationship between the autochthonistic perspective in Nicolae Iorga’s histories and the synchronistic one in E. Lovinescu’s works. Mircea Martin tries to prove that Călinescu’s volume manages to treat the provincial “complexes” of the Romanian literature. Nevertheless, on the side of the thorough analyses, Mircea Martin cannot help his revelatory assertions, noting that Călinescu’s endeavour shaped “the contemporary Romanian literature itself”²¹.

The enumeration of the mythical distortions in these monographs does not necessarily mean the withdrawal of their scientific qualities. To this day, Nicolae Manolescu’s ability to provide a global vision on Maiorescu’s activity has kept its importance, whether it concerned literary criticism texts, parliamentary speeches or journal notes. In *E. Lovinescu, scepticul mântuit*, Eugen Simion practises a close-reading meant to dissect paradigmatically all the underlying concepts of the theoretical project of synchronism. Mircea Martin’s book is, in its turn, a representative overview of G. Călinescu’s historiographical endeavours. At the same time, no one questions the decisive contributions of Maiorescu, Lovinescu or Călinescu to the modernisation of Romanian literature.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 13.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 45.

²⁰ Eugen Simion, *Eugen Lovinescu, scepticul mântuit*, vol. II, p. 218.

²¹ Mircea Martin, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

While the mythologizing biases of the scientific discourse do not cancel its validity, they are representative for the mentality-related phenomenon that helped the prolonged survival of “directional criticism” in the Romanian culture, with all the attributes of the providentialist critic. The last episode of this phenomenon occurred relatively recently, when Nicolae Manolescu’s *Istoria critică a literaturii române* (2008) was anticipated as the providential volume meant to rewrite the canon of modern Romanian literature from the point where Călinescu had stopped in 1941. On the other hand, it is true that the misreadings practised by post-war critics represented a doubly-oriented symbolic transfer of authority. The mythological discourse on Maiorescu, Lovinescu or Călinescu led to the increase of the critic’s authority in the post-war culture and, indirectly, to the self-validation of the hermeneutic scholars who practise this type of interpretation. On the long term, this hegemony of criticism in the field of post-war literature, obtained through strategic alliances with the founding figures, has had a series of outcomes which should be investigated at a deeper level: the conservatism of the critical paradigms that changed through subterraneous, considerably diluted conflicts rather than through open polemic manifestations; the Romanian critics’ implicit nationalism – they chose to relate to the autochthonous models rather than to dialogue with contemporary synchronic criticism; last but not least, the rigidity of the value founding system, given that the literary canon was centred on the critic’s omnipotent presence.

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