

## **THE QUEST FOR NATIONAL IDENTITY IN MAIORESCU'S THEORETICAL ENDEAVOURS: HOW DOES AN ART FOR THE ELITE WORK FOR A NEWBORN CULTURE**

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*Abstract. This study investigates the 19<sup>th</sup> century pretenses to a national Romanian culture based on the activity developed by Junimea (or “The Youth”) and especially by its mentor Titu Maiorescu, whose philosophical principles, later on applied to his essays, were foremost Hegelian in nature and had little to do with Romania's identity as an Eastern European country. Our purpose will be to weigh in at how favorable Maiorescu was to an art for the “electi” through the elitism and aestheticism expressed in his theoretical program at Junimea. In the end we shall assess the input of those particular doctrines as liberty of expression and critical spirit, that he though boosted culture over against the social and political movements of mid 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe. What we propose here is an interrogation addressed to nowadays Romanian theoreticians who dwell upon Romanian literature and culture in its classical times. We envisage those who appreciate this literary era for the inherent beauty and wealth of its creations, but also those who try to defend the then cultural achievements by going against younger contemporary critics whom they accuse of a lack of loyalty towards our classical writers. These “attackers” are especially targeted here, firstly because their accusations are considered biased, and because the sometimes negative analysis of our classics made by the younger critics is not necessarily derogatory. On the contrary, it is meant to revisit and correct unnecessary nostalgic attitudes while investigating just how much Maiorescu's work influenced the 19<sup>th</sup> century Romanian society through his theory of “forms without substance”. Finally, our intention is to draw attention to the fact that the legacy of our Romanian classics can be assessed only when correctly understood, and not out of fear of oblivion.*

*Key-words: culture, politics, aesthetics, Maiorescu, elite*

## **Introduction**

Romanian writers have always been afraid of obscurity, no matter when and what they wrote. Sometimes they were mindful about the need to have and support an aesthetic of their own, *i.e.* a cultural direction or program, and oftentimes they were criticized precisely because of their decrepit or progressive ideas, and also because of their evident lack of poetic vision. Those critics themselves functioned and were perceived as literary guides in their time – they were undoubtedly timely – but despite the dawn of their ideas and the death of their society, Romanian contemporary critics try to keep their flame alive and avoid oblivion when a new literary era brings younger and fresh perspectives into culture. We will see here the 21<sup>st</sup> century Romanian literary critics' intolerance towards change and new ideas particularly in what the 19<sup>th</sup> century Romanian literature is concerned, and also their struggle to keep the 19<sup>th</sup> century aesthetics alive today as proof of national pride and grandeur. We will emphasize here the impact and contribution of the cultural association called Junimea (“The Youth”), with its manyfold cultural and political manifestations in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Romania, which back then carried a new breed of intellectuals and educators involved both philosophically and practically with their contemporary public life. Since their time is long due, and since nowadays literary critics cannot fathom a meaningful cultural program for today's society without perpetual reference to those past times, this study will capture the negative and stubborn reaction of today's Romanian culture and education towards inside and outside voices which dare find faults of judgement and character in them.

### **1. What was Maiorescu's particular aesthetics? Against nostalgia**

What we enterprise here stems from the curious observation which literary critics in, but especially outside Romania only recently began to discuss, namely some unavailing facts concealed in Titu Maiorescu's philosophical program for the Romanian society in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. While his principles were established as an aesthetic theory within the cultural association of Junimea, their failure to attain social impact in spite of the fact that many members of the association benefitted greatly of funds and state scholarships is thought to have reasons deeper than mere conjuncture. Many recent critics take this contradiction back to what is believed to be its real roots, since Maiorescu actually defined his cultural orientation in the footsteps of Hegel's idealism. What we are about to find out is that despite Maiorescu's

attempt to conceive a new artistic phenomenon in his native country which would separate poetry (beauty) from its more decadent scientific realm (truth), this was never an experiment Hegel would have encouraged. Maiorescu's alleged sense of synchronicity with European civilization urged for the rise of an artistic elite, but however noble the intention, his political convenience left the rest of his century with such feared terms as "forms without substance". In the end, these voices fear, Maiorescu's struggle was prompted by his sense of power, and his effort to keep up with the West, that is to synchronize, was but a strange way of departing from the acute political instability and social turmoil in his country.

Nevertheless, many of today's Romanian intellectuals hold that Maiorescu and his association must be "defended" against these recent critics as the most prominent factor of civilization and the most objective catalyst of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Romanian culture, and many other laudatory attributes Maiorescu might have had (no doubt, he had indeed many qualities) during and after his time.<sup>1</sup> In their opinion, the act of "judging" is not compatible with objectivity when one "judges" Maiorescu and Junimea, be it on philosophical or historical grounds, and in spite of the fact that critical thinking implies comparison and concentration on facts instead of undefeated nostalgia. But Maiorescu was not a nostalgic himself!

This statement is supported by two observations. First of all, Maiorescu believed in progress, and was the most stinging critic of the then Romanian poetry, as shown by his

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1 A clarification is in place here. Maiorescu's idea of "synchronization" with the West is somehow different from his citizens idea of "occidentalization" described by his contemporary Jewish writer Moses Gaster as a spirit of hate towards Jews brought in Romania from Western European countries such as France, Germany, and Italy. Maiorescu is actually known to have opposed this sense of "Judeo-fagism" publicly in his study *Against the Barnutiu School* from 1868 (Simion Bărnuțiu was a Transylvanian scholar and legislator, and a constant opponent of Jewish bourgeoisie) and in his Parliamentary speeches given at the end of June 1871, i.e. in the eve of his Parliamentary activity. See Moses Gaster in Marta Petreu, *De la Junimea la Noica: Studii de cultură românească/ From Junimea to Noica: Studies of Romanian Culture*, e-book (Iași: Polirom, 2011), notes 35, 36, 37. This being said, Maiorescu opened towards Kant's aesthetics and the way he defined concepts like "ars gratia artis" in the middle of political turmoil and the birth of Romanian bourgeoisie as a new social class based on antisemitic premises. In this context, Maiorescu began to understand his personal aesthetics as autonomous, a "disinterested contemplation" in the spirit of Schopenhauer and Kant, see Mircea Flonta, *20 de întrebări și răspunsuri despre Immanuel Kant/ 20 questions and answers about Immanuel Kant*, e-book (București: Humanitas, 2013). However, for the many laudatory studies about Maiorescu's all-comprising influence upon Romanian cultural life throughout centuries, see Carmen-Maria Mecu and Nicolae Mecu, "Paradigms of Junimea in Education for a Civil Society", in Magdalena Dumitrana, ed., *Romanian cultural identity and education for civil society V* (Washington, DC: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2004), chapter IX; *Limbă și Literatură/ Language and Literature* 7 (1964): 159; *Limbă și Literatură* 16-17 (1968): 116, 127, 138, etc. This whole "mythology" woven around Maiorescu and Junimea during and beyond his time is very well depicted and presented by Ioan Stanomir in *Junimismul și pasiunea moderației/ Junimea and the passion for moderation*, in the chapter "Un vis al inteligenței libere"/ A dream of free intellectuals, e-book (București: Humanitas, 2013).

extremely acid study *O cercetare critică asupra poeziei române* (A critical survey of Romanian poetry) from 1867. The following year, in 1868, Maiorescu came to the fore with another incisive critical study called *În contra direcției de azi în cultura română* (Against the contemporary direction in Romanian culture)<sup>2</sup>, where he decries the lack of prospect in the then Romanian culture as well in society and politics. His survey of what the Romanian students returned home from their studies throughout Europe managed to carry out in their native country is not encouraging (for Maiorescu's position concerning the then Romanian society and culture, see Ersoy, Górný, and Kechriotis, 2010: 87-93). A young man just like them, having recently graduated with a PhD in Philosophy from the University of Giessen and another one in Letters and Philosophy from the Sorbone in 1860, Maiorescu knew his countrymen. The fact that these young people tried to employ ideas and suggest cultural reforms in their respective fields on Romanian soil was great, but what they found here in terms of institutions and mindset was improper for such cultural developments, and precisely those institution they could not change. They indeed created all the external “forms” that can make for a civilization, namely museums, schools, universities, journals, newspapers, academies, music conservatories, scientific associations, theatres, and a constitution. But all these are deemed “cultural polish” in Maiorescu's views. Maiorescu seized their hesitation, their lack of *know-how*, and the strange result of their attempt he called “forms without substance”, a term he coined to name a disproportionality between stagnant “civilization” and emerging “culture”. However, when Maiorescu says “culture” he apparently matches it with the advantages of it being a national construct, since he states that borrowing different cultural forms from different foreign countries only impedes on the development of a national foundation/ substance. Maiorescu makes such statements starting with the “Preface” to the first edition of his opus called *Critice* (Critical opinions), where his first lines come heavy with disillusionment and harsh critique towards the Balkanism which spread in the Romanian civilization and culture. He does not want his country to be remembered as such in Europe:

The few eminent men that we still have among us withdraw one by one from our public life , and their place is taken by a dashing mediocrity lifting up the banner of nationalism and liberty, a crowd of exploiters for whom the Danube is not large enough to separate them from Byzantium.

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2 For Maiorescu's critical studies we refer to Titu Maiorescu, *Critice 1/Critiques* (București: E. P. L., 1967).

Against them the resistance, even a violent one, was a duty... Hence our critique! But this critique has to be constructive where possible... (Maiorescu, 1967: 12).

From Maiorescu's first thoughts, we gather, constructive critique was not possible yet, because he had to demolish the old system with its imitative lustre and French airs. Thus it opens a gap between upper society, which emulates the example of foreign countries such as Germany and France, and lower society or the peasants, who he thinks are the keepers of authentic Romanian values and virtues. If, then, the new culture means departing from these ancient values and importing new, foreign, unspecific models, the attempt to “modernize” the Romanian “substance” is too far fetched. Real and authentic Romanian forms are born from authentic Romanian substance or they are of no avail. In other words and resuming Maiorescu's concern for Romanian poetry in the 1860s, a literary progress is absolutely necessary and we have to abandon the idea that Romanian literature can live on poorly done translations from French, Italian, German and other foreign literatures, which although philosophically and stylistically superior are far from being specific to our nation. Hence cultural “modernization” must spring from within, which means it ought return to the rich national folklore for inspiration and variety. In this particular instance, going back in time would equal to advancing and modernizing one's culture.

## **2. Maiorescu's aesthetics and society. The anti-political drive**

So much for Maiorescu's proposition of a Romanian culture, or his idea that the “elite” must return to the “essence” for progress. On the other hand, we sense that Maiorescu's anti-nostalgic whims and his critical stance are somehow intended for a limited field. If in his previous papers the critic admonished his contemporaries for intoxicating their public with dramas, novels, and poetry which were but poor imitations of foreign literatures, in 1872 Maiorescu issued another study to set the needed “new direction” of Romanian literature, called *Direcția nouă în poezia și proza română* (The new direction in Romanian poetry and prose). This study is divided into two parts, one dealing with Romanian poetry and poets, and the other with Romanian prose, but most interestingly it introduces a few questions regarding the future (*i.e.* progress) of Romanian culture through what literature brings forward.

The introductory note was followed by Maiorescu's perspective on the then politics (Maiorescu, 1967: 13 and fwd.). A remark here would be that though this study was published in volume in 1872, it was first written in 1971, its 1<sup>st</sup> part being an eulogy of new promising poets such as Mihai Eminescu and Vasile Alecsandri, and the 2<sup>nd</sup> part dedicated to Romanian prose marked Maiorescu's political debut in the Parliament and thus his political writings. His career and his country's future never seemed brighter, but by the time this study appeared in volume in 1872, Maiorescu's 3 year old son died, and his political thought appeared to have shared in his pessimistic mood. Nevertheless, for many years to come Maiorescu would either speak or write about the significance and novelty brought by the new Romanian poets and prose authors of 1870-1900 such as Mihai Eminescu, I. L. Caragiale, Ion Creangă, Ioan Slavici, Samson Bodnărescu, Octavian Goga, Mihail Sadoveanu, etc.

Related to our purpose here, there are two studies written by Maiorescu that catch our eyes with their aesthetic perspective, namely *Comediile domnului Caragiale* (Mr. Caragiale's Comedies) from 1885, while the second is *Eminescu și poeziile sale* (Eminescu and his poems) from 1889, the year Eminescu died. Eminescu was a Romantic poet passionate about the latest philosophical inquiries of his time and also mindful about the state of his contemporary society, an evident trait in his poetry and journalistic work at “Timpul” (The Time). This particular paper was then affiliated with the then Conservative Party politics represented by Maiorescu as its president, which later commissioned him as a Minister for Religious Cults and Public Education, and four years before his death as Prime-Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs in 1913. (For details about Maiorescu's life with its social and political connections, see Eugen Lovinescu, 1972).

From his position, Maiorescu could afford to grant Eminescu a job at The University of Iasi on the condition that he defended his PhD in Berlin, and also, at a later date in 1884 to support Eminescu's frequent stays at the sanatorium where he was reportedly admitted for mental issues (see Ion Mitican, 2008), sending letters to a the disturbed poet to explain that his and other friends' generosity was but a token of appreciation for the genius Eminescu proved himself to be thus far.<sup>3</sup> Maiorescu's relationship with the realist comedy and novellas writer I. L. Caragiale is

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3 Eminescu is the great writer and poet that Romanian literature produced in her “Romantic” era. However, by the time Eminescu prepared his first poem *Venere și Madonă* (Venus and Madonna) for publication in Junimea's magazine “Convorbiri literare” in 1870, European literature had already established names of realist writers such as

also supportive, given that he defended the new author against ill-meant accusations of immorality in his comedies by critics poorly prepared to face the shifting state of things in the European literature of the time, which was indeed preoccupied aesthetically with even the lowest and most abject social realms as Caragiale himself was. Now the interesting fact here is that in both studies, Maiorescu apparently fails to trace Eminescu's pessimistic poetry, for instance, and Caragiale's criticism of the corrupt or imitative type of characters back to their unique way of dealing with social iniquities. In what Eminescu's pessimism is concerned, Maiorescu is rather hesitant to assign it a social root, and instead he blames the "hereditary" element which had also caused the poet's final breakdown and death. In Caragiale's case, the critic states that no accusation of immorality could stand with respect to his work, precisely because Caragiale "recreates reality from an artistically ideal stance and having no intention whatsoever to give this a practical extension" (Maiorescu, 1967: 186 and fwd; also on <http://biblior.net/critice/comediile-d-lui-i-l-caragiale.html>).

We have to mention here that in 1892 Caragiale read a controversial paper at the Atheneum in Bucharest, with the clear intention that it be "against Junimea and Maiorescu", thus his ties with this association and its mentor were broken on the basis of his irony towards a society which loves philosophy but neglects the public (see details on <http://www.confederatii.ro/article/19932/Ion-Luca-Caragiale/2>; also Cioculescu, e-book, *Viața lui Caragiale*, 2012). The fact is that neither Eminescu nor Caragiale wrote outside their respective society, but for them, and while Eminescu was an astute revolutionary in his poetic ideas and newspaper articles, Caragiale followed closely. It cannot be asserted that in his dramatic works or his public life Caragiale only stopped to judge without getting into action (see <http://www.cimec.ro/Carte/1907/1907.htm>, a digital library dedicated to Caragiale's work, where his famous study *1907 din primăvară până-n toamnă* (1907 from Spring to Autumn) traces the peasant revolts from 1907 back to the dysfunctional administration in the Romanian government, which showed no interest in social and political reform). Their work was never disinterested in politics, and it appears that Maiorescu's above mentioned impressions about them are lacking the means to note that.

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Balzac; Stendhal; Dickens; Alexandre Dumas, Son; Flaubert; Ibsen; Gogol; Gottfried Keller, etc. Our reference to Maiorescu's two papers on Eminescu and Caragiale envisages both the close friendship between these two writers and their common concerns for the 19<sup>th</sup> century Romanian society, despite the former being considered the greatest Romantic, and the latter the greatest realistic writer in 19<sup>th</sup> century Romanian literature and beyond.

With Maiorescu we get more and more the feeling that refuting everything else in Romanian aesthetics than art as totally separated from society and politics, his concept of *ars gratia artis* falls short from the ideals of at least these two writers he analyses. Maiorescu seems unable or not ready to admit to the close bounding between art (science, even) and politics, even if he is aware that both give way to feelings. In his study *Asupra poeziei noastre populare* (On our folk poetry), Maiorescu (quoted in Alex Drace-Francis, 2006: 186) states:

Politics, declamations against absolutism, mannered reflections upon the Divinity, immorality, etc., do not achieve their purpose and fail to force the reader to come down from the heights of poetic impression into the midst of everyday preoccupations. Not that the people are merely insensible to such things; but when they make poetry, they don't make politics; when their heart leaps, their reflective capacity ceases...

and Drace-Francis notices a faulty attitude in Maiorescu's claims:

Observable here is a clear distinction between “national” sentiment and “political” idea: Maiorescu is prepared to admit the former as a natural, even popular subject for poetry; but the latter is dismissed as the concern of liberal intellectual rabble-rousers. True national sentiment, then, can be connected with “the people” and with “poetry” and at the same time dissociated from politics and the affairs of the state (Drace-Francis, 2006: 186).

The “healthy air” advocated by Maiorescu in relation with popular/ folk poetry is problematic here, in the context of yet another one of his study, this time from 1906 and dedicated to O. Goga's poems, namely *Poeziile lui Octavian Goga* (The poems of Octavian Goga from 1906). Maiorescu sees the patriotic spirit flying above O. Goga's nationalist poems, while later on Goga was to allow his poems abound with nationalistic ideas, and he made obvious his anti-Jewish views in his capacity as Romanian Prime-Minister at the burst of German National-Socialist ideas throughout Europe. Moreover, in 1936 he actually met Hitler to discuss the problem of bolshevism and gladly embraced the symbol of Nazi swastika (see Ilarion Țiu, 2007, and Ilarion Țiu, 2003; how the Nazi “infestation” happened in Eastern Europe, see in Franz Neumann, 1966). Thus Drace-Francis's conclusions to Maiorescu's aesthetic style: “Romanian

culture was neither the political result of an internal cultural movement... nor the psychological product of reading practices instituted by print capitalism... It was rather a mixture of forms and practices whereby the means for disseminating ideas about the nation and enlightenment were both instituted and simulated. It can be seen as a complex manifestation of modernization rather than as a crude reaction to it..." (Drace-Francis, 2006: 199). In his attempt to secure poetry and culture in general from the political mishaps of his time, Maiorescu sometimes imposed his own ideas on his fellow writers from Junimea, even if, as in Caragiale's case, the then political situation asked for renewal and for the decisive action and involvement of intelligent men in their society.

### **Conclusions**

We have debated here on how Romanian literary theorists nowadays, accompanied by the Romanian public, speak of and deal with the so called "cultural embarrassment" caused by the lack of interest, lack of devotion, and misunderstandings which happen every time one attempts to discuss the Romanian literary classics and their times. I have come to realize that the process of raising people's awareness of this strange situation related to the classics of Romanian literature and culture is not something that these theorists would simply carry on their own soil. Instead of trying to revive the passion for Romanian classical literature from within, they tend to blame young critics coming from Romania or abroad for not sharing their vision of 19<sup>th</sup> century Romanian culture as a Balkanic trend and thus a dereliction of cultural and national duties turning literary diamonds into ashes. My point here was nonetheless that the real mishaps that really happened in this field have long ago crossed the authoritarian boundaries since the more one creates bridges between disciplines and cultures the less he is prone to get stuck into a given tradition of a "select" group of intellectuals. On the other hand, Romanian studies on the 19<sup>th</sup> century literati such as T. Maiorescu or M. Eminescu, for instance, have the greatest chance to sink them into oblivion as long as some critics' agenda is the only one deemed eligible to get the public's respect and attention. As this study showed, a great deal of concepts, ideas, thinkers, and aesthetic models so far put in relation with the Romanian classics are still to be correctly examined in terms of their influence on the classics or the meaning the classics themselves gave them without paying enough attention to their proper context. On the long run, the urge of

contemporary scholars who deal with these classics should be the need to make them known worldwide when their heritage is rightly understood, and not necessarily for fear of oblivion.

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