

THE CRITICAL SPIRIT IN “ROMÂNIA LITERARĂ” IN 1989

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Abstract

This study analyses the identity of literary criticism in 1989 Romania, in the last year of communist dictatorship, by scrutinising literary chronicles published by Nicolae Manolescu and Eugen Simion in “România Literară” (Literary Romania). Through open confrontation with the political system and its ideology, the two critical voices with their authority constitute a bastion of defence for the aesthetic. Being in the first line, the critical feuilleton ensures the dignity of literary criticism and of Romanian intellectual life, at a time when the pages of “România Literară” were filled with articles that were not devoid of political substratum, and the critics were demanded to serve communist ideology.

Keywords: Literary criticism, communism, “România Literară”, Nicolae Manolescu, Eugen Simion

The objective of this intervention pertains to the identity of the literary criticism as it arises from the way it was established and practised, in “România Literară”, by Eugen Simion and Nicolae Manolescu. Of course we can make use of the principle of metonymy to suggest the idea that the part is eloquent for the whole. But it often happens for the details to make the whole. Looking back through the prism of a single moment, with all the risks that such a method entails, means, however, seeing the outlines.

Thus, what happened with “România Literară” in 1989? A quick glance shows that important personalities published here, in the literary history and criticism section, from Z. Ornea, Romul Munteanu, L. Ulici, Valeriu Cristea, Mircea Iorgulescu, Mircea Anghelescu, Al. Piru, D. Micu, Gabriel Dimisianu, Alex. Ștefănescu, Mircea Martin to the young Ștefan Borbely, Ioan Holban, Cristian Moraru, Vasile Popovici, Monica Spiridon or, indeed, to the very young Ramona Fotiade și Corina Ciocîrlie. Beneath this listing, in any case incomplete, and which should end with the realization of a common spirit, it could be implied that nostalgia lies. We would ask ourselves, as did Maioreșcu, “Where are those times and where are those people?”. This is the longing for a paradisiac time, when Nicolae Manolescu wrote about Grigore Vieru, when Eugen Simion wrote about Mircea Mihăieș. Ultimately, the following situation might appear rather carnivalesque-infernal: when Alex Ștefănescu defended Adrian Păunescu, accused by Zaharia Sîngeorzan in “Convorbiri Literare” that he was the “detractor” of Mihai Eminescu.

But time is by no account paradisiac. Time has been, to put it clearly, infernal. Because there existed no issue of “România Literară” free from photographs of the presidential couple or of one of the members of the couple. Photographs of the writers were, of course, missing. On page 1, were texts signed under the name of “R.L”, whose titles were as follows: “With the people for the people”, “Actuality and creation”, “The Agricultural Revolution”, “Work Visits”, “The Vital Centre of the Nation”, “Love of the Country” etc. Being either those who were well-established or youths in their debut, the writers themselves

often signed such ideological texts, fulfilling a command which, if it came from the outside or from the inside, is less important now.

In issue no. 17, Nicolae Manolescu wrote about Gala Galaction, Eugen Simion about Ion Mircea, but the issue stood under the main title “Under flames of May”. In issue no. 24 one could read “The message of the comrade Nicolae Ceaușescu, general secretary of the Romanian Communist Party, president of the Socialist Republic of Romania, with the occasion of the Honorary Symposium «Mihai Eminescu»”. The last statement of “the message” read as follows: “By honouring the memory of Mihai Eminescu, we are doing all that we can to ensure the flawless implementation of the programme of the socialist party, for the continuous flourishing of Romanian art and literature, for enhancing its educational force, to create and to give the people new and valuable works of art which should cater to the progress and fulfilment of the country, to the rise of the socialist identity, to the development of the elevated traits of the new man, the mature, conscious creator of the fairest and most humane societies, of the golden dream of mankind – communism”. Also here, a “Telegram addressed to comrade Nicolae Ceaușescu, general secretary of the Romanian Communist Party, president of the Socialist Republic of Romania, from “The participants of Honorary Symposium dedicated to the Centenarian of Mihai Eminescu” signed by “The participants of the Honorary Symposium dedicated to the Centenarian of Mihai Eminescu”. No later, in issue no. 26, written on entire pages we find “Comrade Nicolae Ceaușescu’s speech at the Central Committee’s of the Romanian Communist Party’s plenary”. Also, in issue no. 27, pages 3-9 feature “The Theses for the 9th congress of the Romanian Communist Party”. The literary criticism is represented in this issue by only four texts. Among them, one on Edgar Papu, signed by Nicolae Manolescu, another, on Bogdan Ghiu, written by Eugen Simion. Issue no. 43 features for the greater part (pages 1-6) “Comrade Nicolae Ceaușescu’s statement regarding the issues of socialism, of ideological, political-educative activity, the development of the revolutionary conscience, of the creation of a new man, conscious builder of socialism and communism in Romania”. Nicolae Manolescu writes about Mircea Nedelciu, Eugen Simion, about Romulus Bucur, Daniel Pișcu, Marcel Tolcea. How can it not be subversive that within these pages massacred by ideology and politics, Nicolae Manolescu and Eugen Simion continue writing about books, often written by youths, completely torn from the oppressive, suffocating context? They seem to be an island of normality in a burlesque carnival. Finally, issue no. 46, from 16th November, is completely occupied by texts under the head title “Welcoming the Congress” entitled “The Pathos of Political Engagement”, “The Arguments of Devotion”, “History Is Calling Its People”, “The Ever-Living Stream”, “The Humanism of the Values of Socialist Cultures”, A Revolutionary Concept of Art and Culture”, “The Congress of the Great Socialist Victories”, “The Involvement of Drama in Establishing the Principles of Socialist Humanism” etc. In any case, the ideological text is broken only by two critical interventions: those signed by Nicolae Manolescu and Eugen Simion. The first one writes about Dumitru Popovici; the latter on Titus Popovici, indicating that the pressure is in a way taking its toll on them as well. Even from these choices there the contraction is obvious. Issue no. 47 contains, from pages 1 through 13, “The Report of Comrade Nicolae Ceaușescu regarding the current state of Romanian Society, at the Activity of the Central Committee between the XIIIth and XIVth Congresses, for the Achievement of the Directive-Programme for Socio-Economic Development in the IX Quinquennium and in

Perspective until the years 2000-2010, with the Purpose of the Relentless Fulfilment of the Programme for the Creation of the Multilaterally-Developed Society and for the Evolution of Romania Towards Communism as presented by comrade Nicolae Ceaușescu”. There are no review texts this time. Thirteen, a sombre number, should have given some peoples’ vigilances food for thought. It is possible that Nicolae Ceaușescu was no longer superstitious. To have one’s portrait in issue no. 13, next to the title “The President and the Country” and to fully exclude literary criticism so as to introduce 13 pages of ideology should have said something to Nicolae Ceaușescu. Or to those around him. In the end, as Nietzsche said, hazard, like God, does not play dice. And if Ceaușescu fell, it probably happened first of all because of 13 pages of ideology in “România Literară”.

What was happening with the critical spirit in these troubled times?! The critical feuilleton offered the chance of solidarity, its goal being, above all, the protection and promotion of values. And, despite some moments of constraint, Nicolae Manolescu and Eugen Simion offer the feeling of freedom. Without a doubt, despite not surfacing, many of their published texts will have had their own stories. Today, the tension which a well-versed reader would then come across when a text was published is not evident in some. And I wonder if when writing that “in every journal there are, in effect, two characters: one which talks and one which is hiding” about Micrea Mihăieș’s debut novel, Eugen Simion did not think that the critical feuilleton could function as a veritable journal. As a side-note, in a commentary from 1989 (from issue no. 31) about an essay-book by Nicolae Manolescu, he confesses: “these writings give the impression of a journal in which fiction calls upon the biographic (the existential, the anecdotic)”. Manolescu himself writes somewhere in the book in question, that he would have wanted to write an autobiography, but one about the experiences of reading... Ultimately, what is the weekly feuilleton in “România Literară”? Besides university criticism, which in any case is toned down, Eugen Simion and Nicolae Manolescu prefer the feuilleton, where their point of view has a civic quality, even without them wanting it or without premeditation on their part.

Regarding the involvement in critique, the year begins with a surprising, bewildering article, signed by Ion Cristoiu. Entitled “1944-1947: The Moral Authority of Critique”, the article treats the subject of the state of literary criticism within the period mentioned in the title. It is the period of transition towards the age of socialist-realism – in such a way that it creates the impression that the statements which discuss this time have as a real referent the present time. Such is the transparency of the equivalences that it is surprising the article received favourable review and was not censored. Was it a matter of blindness? Or of complicity? Was it an act of courage? Hard to say. Thus: Ion Cristoiu cites from a balance of the year 1945 from the newspaper “Ardealul”, which spoke of “the fierce confusion between the aesthetical and the political”, of “all the so-called proletarian sighs” which are present in the poetry of the times, of a lyricism which is faulty by “using the same leitmotifs usually encountered at political meetings”. Of course, the citation is made from a newspaper from 1945. I do not believe that Ion Cristoiu mystifies things. But, written in 1946, the article makes visionary references to what was happening in the 1980s. It is not important that another type of poetry existed in parallel. Additionally, it is worth remembering Ion Cristoiu’s conclusion: “Nothing intimidates the feuilleton critique more. It firmly applies the aesthetic criterion to any literary work, dissociating between value and non-value.” If it is not intended

as a diversion, Ion Cristoiu's words seem to be of a mad courage. In effect, feuilleton critique was forced to disappear in 1947, to live out its agony and finally to abandon the battle for the dissociation between value and non-value. Ion Cristoiu's statement is rather truer for what a few critics, first and foremost Eugen Simion and Nicolae Manolescu, were doing at "România Literară" even in 1989.

Let us return to Nicolae Manolescu and Eugen Simion, not only to analyse their critical discourse, but to see to what extent time takes its toll on these discourses. I would much rather look for their true professions, be they oblique, doubled by the background battles from which something may emerge from time to time. What would I take from that? While discussing a critique book by Perpessicius, Nicolae Manolescu is interested in the way in which, by talking about others, Perpessicius talks about himself. That is why the text is entitled "Perpessicius, Memorialist" (issue no. 11). It concerns indirect memoirs, as Manolescu and Simion are forced to write themselves. When writing about Al. George, Manolescu confesses: "I usually avoid focusing my weekly commentary on works which I find have no merit or on authors who, at least to me, seem critically unverifiable." We may suspect that, within the context of literary life of the time, the statement is not so innocent. And finally, that writing about Ion Pecie, whom he dismisses for his lack of consistency in analysis and judgement, Manolescu considers that "today's Romanian novelist, fed up with creating 'simulations of reality' in his fiction, began to self-analyse himself, becoming his own character." An assertion which amounts to more than a denouncement. Because auto-referential prose is put on account of the impossibility of the author to refer to reality; in the absence of reality, he was forced to be content with "simulations of reality". The idea resurfaces, in one way or another, in the works of Eugen Simion, who often pleads, in his reviews of books of prose, for prose writers to turn from the text towards being, from theory towards the concrete. One day he confesses that "prose will move its focus from text to man". Is such a statement prophetic?! Because how could the writer turn his attention towards man without a radical change of context?! Today, it is hard to tell if such an idea had, back then, such a meaning and if it would have been understood by anyone as such? It is unlikely, since Eugen Simion had talked quite some time before about *The Return of the Author...* As far as Eugen Simion is concerned, some statements regarding the state of the feuilleton are worth remembering.

Firstly, it is worth noting the critical text about Mircea Mihăieş's debut novel "Keeping Watch in the Mirror", which received critical acclaim. Eugen Simion remarks that Mihăieş „writes criticism of welcoming” and continues: "This fact must be emphasised because many young talents abandon this, I admit, difficult endeavour which is not quick enough in bringing the success which the young spirit needs". I would not think that the feuilleton, which, it seems, was in trouble even then, but for completely different reasons than today, did not bring notoriety, if not recognition. A few articles regarding aesthetics published in a prestigious magazine could place one in an area of maximum visibility and interest. I rather incline to think the risks which the feuilleton entails would have made some youths (which ones...?) quit. The difficulty of the endeavour was caused by the context. Eugen Simion thus finds the opportunity to talk about the one of the illustrious agents of the feuilleton, Pompiliu Constantinescu, known for his firm verdict, for his radical position in supporting, implicit thorough analysis, of the autonomy of the aesthetic. Eugen Simion says:

“he who still thinks that feuilletonic literature is a frivolous endeavour and is, even through its nature, estranged from the superior spirit, should read Pompiliu Constantinescu’s articles to convince himself that a man of talent and ideas can express himself in this manner as well”. And after noting possible studies of the scale of Pompiliu Constantinescu, for example one about I. L. Caragiale, Eugen Simion continues: “I continue to like the very fragmentary, feuilletonic, literary critic Pompiliu Constantinescu [...]. Within this reviewer with an immense love for literature and respect for the effort of creation a great critic lives and manifests itself”. All these statements are, without doubt, programmatic.

Are there any other battles apart from these auto-referential ones?! Actually, it is these kinds of battles we are interested in, even though the feuilletonist’s self-image is connected to his manner of engaging in the present. There are battles of which only shadows can be noticed within the pages of “România Literară”. Or rather, only the soot. Take, for example, Nicolae Manolescu. In issue no. 8, he writes an article entitled “The Legacy of Magda Isanos”. The article itself is not of interest here, rather the Post Scriptum, which is a reply to Viorel Dinescu who, in “The Week”, considers that all the favourable statements made by Manolescu about Grigore Vieru in a previous issue must be read as the exact opposite, as reproaches. Upon reading it, we too thought the same, although if it was true, it is unknown whose feelings Manolescu was trying to spare. Some time before, while writing about Ioan Alexandru, he does not hesitate in saying his hymns “expose a rather primitive and simplistic poetic art, made up of rhetoric solemnities” etc. Maybe he had taken into account the national problem involved in the case of the Basarabian poet. What is certain is that Viorel Dinescu, who was not, after all, well-known, denounces this possible double-game in “The Week”. As a side note, it must be said that in order to have a clear understanding of the critical spirit (and not because it was manifested in “The Week”), Eugen Barbu’s magazine should also be read and consulted: only through comparison can we comprehend the scale of the critics’ engagement from “Romania Literara”. Mentioning the intention process which Viorel Dinescu aims at him, Nicolae Manolescu writes in this P.S.: “He (Viorel Dinescu, n.n) can slander me, but he cannot touch me, as we are situated in different intellectual plains. I’ve written (these lines of the P.S., n.n) (by overcoming the feeling which in Romanian we call disgust) only because I did not wish for even the smallest ambiguity in the superlative appreciation I gave Vieru’s poetry for it to keep existing. If it were about Grigore Vieru’s foolery, I would rather have bitten my tongue than utter a word”. Indeed, it is difficult to explain why Nicolae Manolescu engages in dialogue with Viorel Dinescu. Was it on account of the consequences which might have stemmed from such a “slander”? Today, Nicolae Manolescu could walk by Viorel Dinescu without noticing him. Such a Post Scriptum – a speciality of Nicolae Manolescu, willing to get involved in backstage games as an actor – can be found in an issue of “România Literară” from 1988 (no. 23). After a text about the re-editing of *The Woman in Front of the Mirror*, the novel of Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu, Nicolae Manolescu notes that: “I’ve read with great surprise in the «Literary Life» section of our magazine that I’ve participated in a meeting with the readers from a company from Bucharest. I do not even recollect having been invited. I scarcely believe it is about someone else with the same name. And for someone to have impersonated me is even harder to believe. It is worth knowing, however, that, to my regret, I have not taken part in any meeting in the last months”. Irony prevails within. But, beyond irony, Nicolae Manolescu plays the part of

being displeased about not being invited, of regretting it... These are things which speak of the possibilities of escaping from ideological imperatives. There is another P.S., concerning M. N. Rusu, also in “The Week”, in issue no. 21. Something else is interesting here. It is a text about Mircea Ciobanu’s poetry. Within this context, it reads: “Such a structure for a poem is not common in our lyric, maybe even because Modernism is preferred over the fragment, the momentary illumination, the thundering of the image. The exceptions to this are few: Sorin Mărculescu, Liviu Ioan Stoiciu (whose book, *Voices from the Labyrinth*, I talked about not long ago, omitting at that time – and for this I say *mea culpa* – to discuss a fourth book, *The Heart of Rays*, written by the poet, which was not, as the title of my review suggested, only his third book!) and a few more”. Obviously, what is in brackets is of interest here. This specification rather proves that Nicolae Manolescu could not have made any references to that volume. I believe that is the reason for his insistence on reminding, beginning with the title, that LIS was at his third book.

We do not find Eugen Simion engaged in such battles. But, just as Manolescu, he somehow seems involved in what I call future battles. By this I mean we can perceive in some of the attitudes from 1989, something from their future state. This shows that breaking means continuity. Regarding this I would refer to the review called “The Anti-chamber of the Work of Art”, in which Eugen Simion discusses the volume of documents about Rebreanu, signed by Stancu Ilin: “Stancu Ilin brings less significant documents, says Eugen Simion. I wonder, for example, if there was any point in reproducing the letter from 19th March 1932 of Elvira Pârvan Apăteanu, the sister of the philosopher historian, where we find abominable and absurd statements about E. Lovinescu («this Moscalo-Bulgarian Gargantua»). Not all insignificant rubbish must be brought to light”. I would say *history continues*, were it not for the very title of a review from issue no. 40, signed by Nicolae Manolescu. In an obituary-review about Paul Georgescu Nicolae Manolescu talks about the ingratitude of some of those helped by Paul Georgescu at the beginning of the ‘60s: “Who lived through the age in question – of the beginning of the ‘60s – knows to what extent these «worthless things» about everyday life became essential in the future writer’s biography”. The words about Paul Georgescu are not conventional, and Manolescu pleads for honesty and calculated judgement. Before being a positive person, “the mentor, we are told, used to be one of the dogmatic spirits of an age in which they had not been born as writers. And they publicly reproached him that”. Maioreescu continues (it would be good to know who those ingrates were) by saying Paul Grigorescu’s articles from *Critical Endeavours (1957-1958)* “are not some of the most «narrow-minded» of the time”. This is the conclusion: “The critic supported valuable literature, as little as it was, against subproductions, of proletcultist worthless works”.

Before concluding, I would invoke a detail. In issue no. 33 from 1988 (by exception, I have made reference to two or three issues from this year), Nicolae Manolescu writes about *The Hymns of Maramureș*, the book by Ioan Alexandru, not with kind words, as we have already seen. But notice the following detail: the poet’s lexicon, peasant-ish and biblical, and the structure of the phrase, borrowed from religious writers, should bring about an archaic, old feel. Manolescu goes on: “for the same reasons, to create the feeling of being old, he prefers â to î, everywhere, even where they have never been (doborâtă, urâtă)”. Nicolae Manolescu could not suspect what battles would be fought on this issue a few years later.

Finally, two issues stand out. One regards the solidarity which was aimed at protecting the dignity of literary criticism: Nicolae Manolescu and Eugen Simion illustrate in “România Literară” the spirit of true literary criticism, used exactly by the refusal of being used. The other one concerns the ironic game of history. Looking back blissfully, one discovers an end which bears within its roots (why not the wanderings?) of the beginning. In any case, in hard times, the feuilleton seemed to be in the first line of battle with the omnipresent, yet hard to see or harder to identify, enemies.

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