

**MARIN PREDA'S NOVELS: BETWEEN THE INCLUSION IN LITERATURE SYLLABI AND THE POST-1990 CRITICAL REVISIONISM**

**Daniela Bobu Turcu, PhD Student, "Dunărea de Jos" University of Galați**

*Abstract: Analysing the issue of canonical revision, identifiable at the level of the post-1990 discourse of criticism, we have started from the assumption – in which some acquiesce, some do not – that Marin Preda's oeuvre must remain a point of reference in literature syllabi, as an important part of our cultural identity. Constantly present in curricula, Marin Preda is an authentic aesthetic benchmark, and high school students still enjoy his novels. Starting from the critical debates concerning the necessity to amend the post-war literary canon, the present article aims at analysing the presence of the canonical novelist in the textbooks and syllabi after 1990, in an attempt to demonstrate the resistance of Marin Preda's novels in relation to the paradigmatic changes in literature during the same period. Within this framework, our undertaking targets the reception of Marin Preda's novels, both at the time of their publication and nowadays, approaching this topic from an aesthetic, historical-literary, and pedagogical perspective.*

**Keywords: canonical writer, aesthetic reference points, cultural identity, paradigms of literature, critical reception.**

The reflection on the study of the canonical writers in high school textbooks edited after 1990 should be circumscribed to a wider discussion on the curricula and textbooks in use after 1990, on the literary canon in general, and especially on its part included in literature syllabi. In this context, the present paper aims at succinctly accounting for the way in which a canonical writer such as Marin Preda is studied at the high school level, but also at analysing the way in which his novels are regarded in the post-1989 critical revisions.

After 1990, Romanian school has been strongly influenced by periodical changes and revisions of the curriculum, by the introduction of the alternative textbooks, and also by the new educational approach based on learning contents specific to Romanian language and literature in high school.

With a tremendous impact on the formation of the students' personality and on the acquisition of some skills and abilities necessary for an active integration in a knowledge-based society, the subject Romanian language and literature has, at present, a stake in forming new competences, values and attitudes in the high school students.

The new curricular documents provision an integrated study of language, communication and literary texts, whilst the criterion for arranging the literary texts in textbooks is no longer chronological. Neither is Literary History taught anymore, however, a new chapter has been introduced, The Dialogue of Arts. What is truly worth mentioning is that the present curriculum only provides guidelines, and the teacher is free to choose from various learning contents, themes and texts, as long as the canonical writers are included.

In keeping with the curricular reform, more textbooks have been edited to replace the old, unique one. Except for the compulsory inclusion of the canonical writers, these alternative textbooks provide texts from various ages, belonging to numerous writers. The freedom which these textbooks give also applies to the way in which the literary texts are introduced: not by providing critical assessments of the textbooks authors, but by triggering

the students' reaction through guided questions. Even when a critical review is available, it is facultative and intended as a guideline. Thus, emphasis is laid on the notion that the student must be taught to read and understand, to dare having and sharing a personal opinion.

One of the meanings of the notion 'canon' is that of a controlling ideological institution which imposes privileged orientations in what concerns the exegetic activity of its supporters: the canon controls the formation, imposes restrictions, naming what is to be interpreted and validating the means through which and the ends towards which interpretation is constructed. At level of the so-called 'school canon', the major issues are: the selection of the authors and texts included in the curriculum and the textbooks, but also the way in which history of literature and the practice of literary history are construed and illustrated.

Having all these in mind, our aim is to analyse the persistence of Marin Preda's novels in the textbooks and curricula after 1990, aiming at demonstrating that Marin Preda ought to remain in the list of canonical writers, and that he is still appreciated by high school students. To this end, we will discuss the relations between critic and literary work, between critic and political imposition, between critic and literary criticism, between critic and readers, relations that will be not emphasised as totalities, but as representations.

Without aiming at a thorough critical research, we intend to show the way in which some novels by Marin Preda have been kept in textbooks along the years. If one opens randomly a textbook or any of the curricula before 1990, one surely notices that *Moromeșii* ['The Moromete Family'] and *Cel mai iubit dintre pământeni* ['The Most Beloved of Earthlings'] were always present. The study of the novel was prefaced by preliminaries, announcing that Preda's most important novel, *Moromeșii*, was anticipated and prepared by his short stories. The narratives *Dimineață de iarnă* ['A Winter Morning'], *O adunare liniștită* ['A Quiet Gathering'] and *În ceață* ['Into the Mist'] prefigured motives, events and characters in the novel, but they also announced the fundamental obsession of Marin Preda's oeuvre, the fate of the Romanian peasant. Marin Preda started his short story *În ceață*, in the volume *Întâlnirea dintre pământuri* ['The Meeting between the Lands'] with: "*Uitați-vă la el, sări-i-ar bolboșile ochilor! De ce tăceți din gură? Îi sparg capul ăluia care s-o apropia de mine ... al dracului să fiu dacă nu pun mâna pe un par și vă zbor!*"<sup>1</sup>, and went on like this along the entire first chapter of the short story. It seems that he wanted to impress his readers with his boldness to have reproduced in writing, with graphic details, the instant enragement of a simple man. The writer abides here by the principles of Naturalism, both in intention, and in form and content.

Misconstrued, if not wrung, in many respects, loaded with an ideology and a goal completely detached from its essence, intention and techniques, naturalism will be considered for a long time reactionary and dangerous. Failure of the prose was often associated with naturalism, with the lack of class action, party spirit, and ideological elevation. In search of the "weapons" that the people needed, read with the deforming lenses of the one and only possible literary and ideological current, the books of that time had started sharing the most insecure destiny. What was at stake was to completely elude the aesthetics in formulating

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<sup>1</sup> *Just look at him, may it stick in his gizzard! Why do you all keep quiet? Just get closer, anyone of you, and I'll smash your heads... Damned if I won't get a pole and blow your all!* [our translation]

judgements of value, and to channel both the literary creation and its reception exclusively towards deciphering the mobilization index: Fight! Work! Hate!

However, Marin Preda's novels have somehow managed to 'stay'. Featured in the unique textbooks before 1990, but also in the alternative textbooks published and used after 1990, the novels are still read by high school students, especially due to their humorous and accessible language.

The author of *Moromeții* was not at all times glorified and praised, literary criticism often sanctioning Marin Preda's attitude and moral-political behaviour. A significant effort in destroying prejudice against a writer is represented by the aesthetic invalidation of his works. The presumptive pro-communist convictions and attitudes of a writer do not necessarily entail lack of aesthetic value. The literary works should pass the test of time, which Marin Preda's novels have clearly done, up to these days, by detaching themselves from the impositions of politics and by regaining their artistic (aesthetic) specificity.

In the literary press after 1989 there were, however, voices that belittled the aesthetic value of Marin Preda's novels. Without attempting to analyse all the critical debates, we will mention here a few names more frequently encountered in the Romanian literary press, such is the case of Gheorghe Grigurcu, Alexandru George and Eugen Negrici.

In *Contemporanul. Ideea europeană*, Gheorghe Grigurcu advocated, as early as 1990, the necessity for a "Romanian Nurnberg" and cast a moral-political indictment on the public figure and literary work of Marin Preda [Grigurcu, 1990: 4]. What the critic reproached the novelist was the fact that "he lacked the strength of sacrificial reclusion, of ascetism through writing", explaining, in legal terminology, "the two types of evidence" which he used to prove "the inconsistency of the novelist's moral exemplarity". In this blemishing indictment, Gheorghe Grigurcu used quotations from Preda's novels as evidence, alluding to Marin Preda's political views and judging the writer through politics and directives. The critic's sustained effort towards the aesthetic invalidation of Marin Preda's oeuvre continues along the same lines:

*A doua categorie de probe de care am făcut uz este alcătuită din elemente de biografie și portret moral. Izvoarele au fost propriile noastre amintiri, confesiunile unor apropiați ai scriitorului, mărturiile altor confracți, fie, deocamdată, orale, fie conținute deja în scrisori ce ne-au fost adresate și pe care le ținem la dispoziția celor interesați. E de la sine înțeles faptul că nu s-a putut scrie până în prezent o viață a lui Marin Preda, detaliată și într-un spirit nepărtinitor.* [Grigurcu, 1991: 7]<sup>2</sup>

In 1999, Al. George publishes, in the volume *Reveniri, restituiri, revizuri* [*Recoveries, Restorations, Revisions*], an article entitled "*Patografia unei erori: 'Cel mai iubit dintre pământeni'*" [The Pathography of an Error: 'The Most Beloved of Earthlings'], in which he characterises Marin Preda's moral, social, political and intellectual stance, by resorting to a sociological line of argumentation:

<sup>2</sup> The second category of evidence used consisted of elements of biography and moral portrait. We used our personal memories as sources, and also testimonies of the people close to the writer, testimonies of other writers, either spoken or in writing, in letters sent to us, which we could offer to anyone interested in reading them. It goes without saying that a "life of Marin Preda", detailed and unbiased, could not have been written up to this moment.

*El avea experiența unui băiat de la țară, care a petrecut după adolescență mai bine un deceniu în mediile periferice ale Capitalei (fiind adăpostit un timp de un frate gunoier) cu contacte cu lumea boemă, pentru ca, mai târziu, fără să părăsească total aceste relații, să intre în nomenclatura comunistă, devenind, pe măsura afirmării, un privilegiat al regimului. Nici prin căsătorie el nu s-a aflat în situații normale, măcar într-atâta încât să capete informații despre drama societății mai înalte românești din acei ani, sau să deprindă ceva de la rămășițele ei supraviețuitoare, încă foarte numeroase. Niciodată nu a excelat el în prezentarea lumii intelectuale [George, 1999: 34]<sup>3</sup>.*

In 2006, the same Al. George discusses George Geacăr's extended essay *Marin Preda și mitul omului nou* ['Marin Preda and the New Man Myth']. He brings arguments against Preda's works, claiming that "he was just a poor peasant boy ejected from his natural environment", that his father was a soldier in cavalry and not with the mountain huntsmen, also that "Al. Ivasiuc despised and detested him so much" or that Marin Preda "didn't like Nietzsche".

Eugen Negrici also attempts at debunking Marin Preda, arguing that he was a tool of the communist-nationalist propagandistic system and appealing to moral and political criteria: "*Figurile marcante ale literaturii scrise în comunism ar fi trebuit să ne ofere destule motive de antipatie prin lipsa de atitudine, fie și în chestiuni minore*" [Negrici, 2008]<sup>4</sup>.

With such examples, it is clear that all the attempts to reassess and revise the scale of literary value established up to 1990 are grounded, almost exclusively, in political and ideological arguments. On the other hand, it is obvious that these literary critics are particularly subjective, when they mention Marin Preda's arrogance.

The aim of these "revisionist" demarches is that of taking out of the collective memory and identity conscience some powerful elements of Romanian literature, where Marin Preda undoubtedly belongs.

The author of *Moromeții* should be judged only with regard to his literary works! The "aesthetic hierarchies based on moral criteria" [Diaconu, 1991: 4] are simply out of place. The wave of the aesthetic-based recoveries is, after 1990, the concern of a few outstanding issues of a number of literary journals such as *România Literară*, *Caiete Critice*, *Literatorul*, *Contrapunct* and *Calende*. We shall exemplify with the debate *Revizuirile în literatură* [Literature Revisions] in *România Literară*, January 29<sup>th</sup>, 2003, a chance for some scholarly interventions with an aim at aesthetically recovering the literature written and published during the communist age.

A series of thematic articles struggles to revalidate the substantial writings of the totalitarian age. Eugen Simion, a pioneer of the aesthetic revisionism phenomenon, argues:

*Ce motive ar avea alții să mizeze pe noi, scriitorii, să ne respecte, să ne sprijine financiar și moral când noi spunem că Eminescu este nul, că Arghezi și Sadoveanu s-au*

<sup>3</sup> He had the experience of a peasant boy who had spent, after adolescence, more than a decade in the marginal categories at the outskirts of the capital, hosted by a brother who was a janitor. He had had relations in the bohemian society and later, without giving up these connections completely, he acceded to the communist nomenclature, becoming a minion of the regime, at the same time with his gaining acknowledgement as a writer. He didn't find himself in normal situation through marriage either, not even as much as to acquire some information about the dramas in the higher ranks of Romanian society, or to learn something from what had remained of it. He never excelled in depicting the intelligentsia.

<sup>4</sup> The renowned figures of the literature produced in communism should give us many reasons for not liking them through their lack of attitude, even in the case of the most unimportant issues.

*prostituat, că fenomenul Preda este o dubioasă afacere comunistă, că G. Călinescu ne-a lăsat o mare pacoste (Istoria literaturii române)?* [Simion, 2003: 197]<sup>5</sup>

The discourse of criticism after 1990 places much emphasis on political dissidence through aesthetics, aiming at defeating the political, the ideological and the imposture through the literary work. Eugen Simion strongly refutes the revisionist critics who vehemently claim that the critical works written in the national-communist age are null and void. An apprentice of Lovinescu's school of criticism, he trenchantly castigates Monica Lovinescu's "east-ethic" excesses and argues in favour of a "resistance through aesthetic" formula.

Marin Preda's novels have also been inscribed in a genuine revisionist programme.

It all started in 1990, when Preda's revisionist record was initiated by I. Negoïtescu and Gh. Grigurcu, followed by S. Damian and a few others. Revision may be considered ended in 2004, with George Geacăr's study, '*Marin Preda și mitul omului nou*'.

Such a reassessment was necessary in light of Preda's "unbearable cult of personality", an idea that has lasted until today. Many literary critics have seen along the years a genuine moral point of reference, which is the reason why we have to place his works on solid grounds, arguing for his keeping among the canonical writers. Textbooks have always proposed *Moromeții* for studying at high school level, which is, fortunately, the case until today.

In the old textbooks, Preda occupied a privileged placement. He was the first to be mentioned in the chapter *Romanian literature after the Second World War*. After a short introduction of the literature of those times, emphasis was laid on prose writers and Preda's writings were constantly present.

The textbook published in 1977 by *Editura Didactică și Pedagogică* features Marin Preda on twelve pages, a didactic undertaking which proposed a detailed analysis of the novel *Moromeții*, up to a syntactic and morphological analysis. Another old 10<sup>th</sup> grade textbook, published in 1981, attempts a comparative study of the novels *Desculț* ['Barefoot'] by Zaharia Stancu and *Moromeții* by Marin Preda, and later, in the unique 12<sup>th</sup> grade textbook of 1997, also published by *Editura Didactică și Pedagogică*, Romanian literature after the Second World War was treated diachronically. On page 147, the authors discussed the pressure of the interwar models, and on 148, they approached the regaining of authenticity.

Partially freed from ideological pressure, much of the prose of this period brings to the fore "the obsessive decade" (Marin Preda's syntagm), tackling, in a realistic manner, the relation between individual and history, and laying emphasis on the existential analysis. Among the representatives of the political novel, one should certainly count Marin Preda, with his novels *Delirul* ('The Delirium') and *Cel mai iubit dintre pământeni* ('The Most Beloved of Earthlings').

The biographical details, on the 150<sup>th</sup> page of the 1997 textbook, present Marin Preda as a defender of realist literature. The following six pages outline fragments of the first volume of *Moromeții*, together with the textual analysis. On the next twelve pages, there is an

<sup>5</sup> What reasons are there for endorsing us, the writers, how could someone respect us, provide us financial and moral support when we say that Eminescu is zero, that Arghezi and Sadoveanu prostituted, that the Preda phenomenon is a dubious communist affair, that G. Călinescu left us a huge deadwood (*History of Romanian Literature*)?

analysis of narrative structure and themes of the novel (in both volumes), concluded with some short comments on the village image and narrative art. Conclusions, on page 168, underline the elements of originality in the novel. There are also some thematic analogies with the works of Slavici, Creangă, Sadoveanu and Rebreanu. The chapter ends with two revision questions and bibliography. The second text proposed for analysis is made up of fragments of another novel, *Cel mai iubit dintre pământeni* [‘The Most Beloved of Earthlings’], on only four pages, this time. The chapter on Marin Preda is concluded with two exercises. One of them requires the student to write an argumentative essay starting from the assertion: “Man is a divinity enchained by circumstances”.

In the spirit of the curricular reform, the unique textbook is replaced with alternative textbooks, edited by various publishing houses approved by Ministry of Education. For comparative purposes, we have opted to analyse a 9<sup>th</sup>-graders textbook published by Corint Publishing House in 2004. The first strikingly different aspect is the way in which the themes are organised. It is no longer a diachronic presentation, as it used to be in the old textbook, but a thematization of *The Ages of Man in the Dimension of Arts: Childhood, Adolescence, Maturity and Senescence*. Under the coordination of Eugen Simion, member of the Romanian Academy, the authors of this textbook, professors Florina Rogalski, Daniel Cristea-Enache and Andrei Grigor, propose, in the second chapter, *Adolescence*, in the subsection *Fiction and Reality*, a few fragments of the novel *Viața ca o pradă* (‘Life as a Prey’). Under the title *Tatăl și fiul la răscruce* [‘Father and Son at the Crossroads’], the text proposed for analysis sets out with a series of exercises of textual analysis: the students are required to comment on some episodes of the plot development; to account for the significance of the journey; to identify the opposition elements between father and son, but also to explain the use of some punctuation marks. Two more pages offer the students interpretation guidelines, aphorisms, various exercises in creative and critical writing, and a selected bibliography.

There are, indeed, major differences both in form and approach. Whilst the old textbooks were the size of a regular book and did not have too many pictures, the new ones come in a larger size and feature different contents of learning. The authors of the alternative textbooks have a different vision in what concerns the critical approach of the texts proposed for analysis. The examples above should suffice for understanding the way in which Marin Preda was taught before 1990 and how different is the reception of his works nowadays. Even so, we should appreciate the continuity of the presence of the novel *Moromeții* in the high school textbooks, as well as the effort of the Romanian teachers towards the preservation of the canonical writers, and implicitly of the true values and aesthetic models.

This synthesis of simple, summarized observations leads to the conclusion that we need to take the powerful elements of Romanian literature out of the collective memory and the post-1989 identity conscience.

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