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This paper proposes the plan of an alternative history of literary criticism, which should be able to avoid both the mere succession of theories and methods in the traditional historiography and the simple registration of the succession of representations of the works and authors, considered by the 'aesthetics of reception'. For this purpose, we advance the hypothesis that, between the 'pure' theory and the 'applied' commentary, there is an intermediate level, the level of the categories that govern the interpretation and the valuation of works during a certain period. Our hypothesis is then checked by the analysis of the readings dedicated to the Romanian writers Ion Creangă, Mihail Sadoveanu and George Bacovia, whose reception was carried out, throughout the 20th century, along the 'natural' – 'artistic' ('artificial') – 'bookish' ('livresque') axis. The conclusion of this paper is that such a history of critical reading provides us with the opportunity of considering in a unified manner the literary paradigm shifts and, thus, to reintegrate better the history of literary criticism in the history of literature as a whole.

Almost seven decades ago, René Wellek put across a famous aporia of the literary history: "Most leading histories of literature are either histories of civilization or collections of critical essays. One type is not a history of *art*; the other, not a *history* of art."¹ The consequences of this statement are generally known: a great part of the contemporary literary historiography still lives in the shadow of this paradox, seeking to reconcile successfully the criticism and the 'general' history. However, the American critic failed to note that these issues are not raised only by literature as such, but also by the manner of commenting it. For example, if we consider the literary criticism, we will detect here a similar dilemma. Most histories of literary criticism are, in fact, histories of literary theory in which the authors attempt to reconstruct from the shards of the analyses the grand mirrors of theories and methods. A conclusive aspect in this direction: the only history of this genre existing in Romania – Florin Mihăilescu's² – is called *Conceptul de critică literară în România* [*The Concept of Literary Criticism in Romania*], and certainly not *The History of Romanian Literary Criticism*. But not even the monumental *History of Modern Criticism*³, written by Wellek himself, could be an exception: essentially, it is a history of literary theories from neoclassicism to the Second World War, although – strangely enough – Wellek himself had delineated clearly the criticism from the literary history and theory. In other words, most literary criticism historians take into consideration the Theory, in its 'phenomenal' incarnations, rather than the Criticism seen as an autonomous set of heterogeneous practices.

Several hypotheses

The consequences of this state of things are by no means auspicious. First, such an

¹ René Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature*, Harcourt, Brace and Company, New York, 1949, p. 264.

² Florin Mihăilescu, *Conceptul de critică literară în România*, 2 vol., Minerva, Bucharest, 1976-1979.

³ Cf. René Wellek, *A History of Modern Criticism: 1750-1950*, 8 vol., Yale University Press, New Haven, 1955-1992. The same situation is also seen in Peter Brooks, H. B. Nisbet and Claude Rawson (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, 9 vol., Cambridge University Press, Cambridge/New York, 1989-2005.

approach is obviously restrictive: it is as if we condensed the history of poetry to the history of *artes poeticae*. Then, many historians ignore frequently an ordinary aspect: the reality of the reading announces recurrently the critics' theoretical intents. In the act of reading, the critics often move away from their assumed method, similarly to how the poets comply with the promises they make in their *artes poeticae*. As it may be easily guessed, this idea originates in an older essentialist (even metaphysical) preconception, with respect to the precedence of theory over practice. Like a pupil who cannot use his spelling book without help from the teacher, the critic should follow the advice from the theoretician meant to alphabetise him. Certainly, the reality is completely different, for, many times, the empirical behaviour determines the theory and not the other way around. However, even if we were to surmount such a preconception, the essential problem lingers: is an alternative history of criticism possible, one that could see in the evolution of the genre something different from a mere succession of theories? The alternative could be given only by shifting the problem to another level, regularly ignored until now: the reading. However, another obstacle is seen here: could we cut satisfying paradigms in the heterogeneous field of the critical readings?

As far as I am concerned, I believe that the diversity of the critical readings is not substantially different from the diversity of the literary creations. When discussing Borges, Gérard Genette explained, in several sentences, the relation between these two plans: "Each book is reborn in each reading, and literary history is at least as much the history of the way and the reasons for reading as it is the history of the ways or the aims of writing. 'A literature differs from another less in the text than in the way it is read: if I could read any page written today – such as this page – as it will be read in the year 2000, I would know the literature of the year 2000'"⁴. Therefore, there is a coherence of the readings of an era as there is equivalence between these readings and the works that determined them. Which of these coordinates determine the other – this is an issue I'm not interested in here. Nevertheless, the important aspect is that regularities exist and that they can be described. We only need to find the appropriate concepts.

I will attempt to further draw a small theory on this phenomenon. Readings are heterogeneous, but they always intersect on an empirical field (i.e., works commented on), whereas the works as such are present only in the conceptual glasshouse painstakingly built around them by the critics. Irrespective of how challenged the concept of 'literary work' may have been, ever since the structuralism, it is undeniable that two different readings of the novel *Madame Bovary* share more common notes than, for instance, *Madame Bovary* and *Le Rouge et le Noir*. Certainly, such an observation is embarrassingly commonplace. However, it does not lack signification, since metacriticism enjoys a consistency of its own object, which can only be dreamt of by the 'regular' criticism. On the other hand, here, too, the differences are as important as the convergences. While it is homogeneous at the level of the object, the critical reading is necessary polemic, irrespective of whether we label it 'unfaithful'⁵ (Nicolae Manolescu) or 'antithetical'⁶ (Harold Bloom). Rome's expansionism could only manifest

⁴ Gérard Genette, *Figures I*, Editions du Seuil, Paris, 1966, p. 130.

⁵ Nicolae Manolescu, *Lecturi infidele*, Editura pentru Literatură, Bucharest, 1966, pp. 178-187.

⁶ Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence. A Theory of Poetry*, second edition, Oxford University Press, New York/ Oxford, 1997 [1973], pp. 93-96.

fully once the ground on which once stood Carthage was ploughed; likewise, criticism can only build on the ruins of former structures.

I cannot see a more appropriate metaphor to describe this clash of interpretations than the image of the ‘field’. Pierre Bourdieu uses it often⁷ in order to illustrate the arrangement of agents in the social space. His perspective is, certainly, a sociological one, but I see no impediment in using this model in order to describe the position of the interpretations in relation to a literary work or paradigm. All the more so as, no matter how spread in time they are, the works, as well as their readings, exist, in T.S. Eliot’s words, in a simultaneous “ideal order”⁸. Beyond this, Bourdieu’s model has three major advantages. First, because of its polarisation (positive and negative), it also includes an axiological perspective, often eluded by literary theorists. Second, it is a dynamic model that explains the changes within the (succession of movements, of formulas, or briefly, of paradigms) by the weakening or, on the contrary, by the intensification of the forces claiming the field. Finally, the chart is complex enough so as not to mutilate the corresponding empirical reality. This happens because Bourdieu’s field is, in its turn, a scaling reduction for a series of ‘subfields’ that coexist and whose tectonics determines the system’s general variations.

Several examples

However, in order to exit this arid ground of discussion, I would better use several examples that can illustrate more compellingly what was said. Briefly, I will refer to the manner in which, throughout the 20th century, the reading of three important Romanian writers (Ion Creangă, Mihail Sadoveanu and George Bacovia) evolved; their ‘cases’ are relevant first of all owing to their ‘canonical’ status, but also because, given the extensive process of their reception, they allow a more comprehensible development of the process occurred in one of the ‘subfields’ mentioned. More precisely, I am talking about the ‘natural’ – ‘artistic’ – ‘bookish’ axis, which reveals one of the most important polarities of the critical reading.

Shortly after Ion Creangă’s death (1839-1889), one of his first commentators, N. Iorga, was stating that the prose writer’s works “act only in the direction of rendering to us, unspoiled by foreign tendencies and neologisms in vocabulary and syntax, the authentic spirit of the people from whom he learnt his writing craft and who placed on this vivacious and sturdy temperament their indelible seal”⁹. Iorga affixes here the well-known image – later turned into a preconception – of Creangă’s ‘popularity’, whose main merit seems to have been his artlessness, the inspired fact of having stayed close to the people’s heart. However, the thesis was already commonplace in the epoch; Titu Maiorescu himself had anticipated it in *Literatura română și străinătatea* [*The Romanian Literature and the Overseas* (1882)], when he has placed Creangă’s writing in the category of the ‘popular novel’¹⁰. This ‘popular’

⁷ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, edited and introduced by Randall Johnson, Columbia University Press, New York, 1993; see also *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1996.

⁸ T.S. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent” [1919], in *Selected Essays*, Faber & Faber, London, 1948, p. 15.

⁹ N. Iorga, “Ion Creangă” [1890], in *Pagini de tinerețe*, vol. I, edition, foreword and bibliography by Barbu Theodorescu, Editura pentru Literatură, Bucharest, 1968, p. 206.

¹⁰ Titu Maiorescu, “Literatura română și străinătatea” [“The Romanian Literature and the Overseas”, 1882], in

stereotype will only be rectified by Ibrăileanu's studies – *Povestirile lui Creangă* [*Creanga's Stories* (1910)] and *I. Creangă. Țăranul și târgovățul* [*I. Creanga. The Peasant and the Town Dweller* (1924)] –, which dissociate the (anonymous, collective, 'national') literary material from the (individual and original) literary form. In this new critical representation, Creangă becomes a "fine" writer, a "great talent", original owing to "his sensitivity, his tone, his turn of phrase", in short, a true artist, eventually an artisan¹¹. It is not the 'nature' (material) of the prose that matters now, but the author's ability of processing it, of turning it into 'art'. But the preconception of the 'people's writer' was definitively shattered only by Călinescu's monograph, in which Creangă was seen as "a bookish author", "an erudite" and "an aesthete of the philology"¹². The prose writer is placed here in the sphere of 'learned' literature and, even more, Călinescu deems him a downright intellectual author, noting only one aspect: the writer proves his skill in the area of popular culture and not in the space of modern literature. Călinescu's interpretation closes thus a loop: during one half of a century, Creangă's creation had walked the way from the 'natural' to the 'bookish' (*via* the 'artistic'), and came to attain diametrically opposite significations to those attributed to it in the starting point. During the immediately following epoch, a surprise came from a young critic who considered that "everything was said about Creangă, it is impossible to say something absolutely new"¹³. Particularly that the author of this statement was himself a follower of Călinescu's style and of the unrestricted re(invention) of the creation. However, Nicolae Manolescu was right, to a certain extent: in the 'subfield' we are discussing here (which was, for a long time, the core of the critical concerns on Creangă), "everything was said", all the semantic alternatives had already been exhausted. The space of the possible interpretations had become saturated, so to speak. "New (absolutely new?) things" have been said ever since, but not in this line of argumentation.

Things were different with the reception of Mihail Sadoveanu (1880-1961). In his 1906 academic report, Titu Maiorescu notes the "simplicity" of the characters' speech ("each according to his special nature") and identified the "highest merit" of Sadoveanu's story in the veridical culmination of the action: "The denouement is never strained, instead it is handed as a necessary result, somehow similar to a natural law"¹⁴. Therefore, the 'natural'. For several decades, Sadoveanu's readings will be marked by 'naturalism' (doubly understood: as the historical movement founded by Zola, and as the intimacy with the physical or moral 'nature'). Several years later, in the definitive edition of the first volume of *Critice* [*Critical Essays* (1925)], Lovinescu locks the novelist in the formula of a "lyrical materialism: life is sung depending on its elementary functions, depending on instincts, on bestiality, lacking ideal preoccupations"¹⁵. Conversely, Ibrăileanu will seek to prove the writer's capacity of

Opere, vol. I: *Critice*, edition, chronology, notes and commentaries by D. Vatamaniuc, introductory study by Eugen Simion, Fundația Națională pentru Știință și Artă – Univers Enciclopedic, Bucharest, 2005, p. 556.

¹¹ G. Ibrăileanu, "Povestirile lui Creangă" ["Creanga's Stories", 1910], in *Opere*, vol. II, critical edition by Al. Piru and Rodica Rotaru, foreword by Al. Piru, Minerva, Bucharest, 1975, pp. 187.

¹² G. Călinescu, *Ion Creangă: Viața și opera*, Editura pentru Literatură, Bucharest, 1964, p. 321.

¹³ Nicolae Manolescu, *Lecturi infidele*, ed. cit., p. 7.

¹⁴ Titu Maiorescu, "Povestirile d-lui M. Sadoveanu" ["Mr. Sadoveanu's Stories", 1906], in *Opere*, vol. I: *Critice*, ed. cit., p. 764.

¹⁵ E. Lovinescu, *Critice*, vol. I, definitive edition, Ancora, Bucharest, 1925, p. 53.

‘creation’, but this time his demonstration remains in the sphere of the general ideas¹⁶. The rehabilitation he had managed to perform for Creangă will fail in Sadoveanu’s case. However, the polemics between the two critics is significant for a specific mentality: none of them challenges the other’s interpretations, but merely his value judgments; both of them share the same common image of the work, but each of them assesses it differently; therefore, this is not a clash of two systems of reading, but of two ideologies. This also explains why the ‘artistic’ proof of Sadoveanu’s work will be brought only later by Călinescu in his 1941 *Istoria literaturii române [History of the Romanian Literature]*. He will bring it by using one of Ibrăileanu’s preferred arguments: the language. By considering the 1930s historical novels “the writer’s most valid work”, Călinescu remarks here Sadoveanu’s “maturity of the verbal means”: the language is “unreal [...], an original blend of Neculce’s, rural, Transylvanian and even Wallachian speech, learned language and religious language, bearing no resemblance with its partial sources”¹⁷. A quarter of century later, this perspective will be substituted by the image of an erudite and intertextual Sadoveanu, asserted by Nicolae Manolescu in his 1976 monograph. The specificity of the novelist’s work is described here in several sentences that will become famous in the Romanian criticism: “The World and the Book face each other relentlessly: and their relation is the most profound concern of Sadoveanu’s last works. The beautiful Book prevails over an ugly World. The imaginary universe of the literature is the sacred cave in which the writer shuts himself, like Breb, last Deceneus of a serene and morally uplifting art. Hence, a utopia of the book.”¹⁸ In this manner, they close the circle of the interpretation, sentencing the future readings – even those made by skilled exegetes such as Al. Paleologu, Constantin Ciopraga, Ion Vlad or Monica Spiridon – to enter *a fortiori* an epigone corridor.

With respect to George Bacovia (1881-1957), the dispute between ‘natural’ and ‘artificial’ polarised the field of the inter-war Romanian reception. Without being exclusively revealed in the polemics between E. Lovinescu and G. Călinescu, it did identify, however, with the dispute between the two critics. Thus, in *Poezia nouă [The New Poetry (1923)]*, the former placed Bacovia in the category of “poetry of atmosphere”, which would mean, according to the critic, “the removal of any artifice”. Moreover: “Bacovia’s poetry is the expression of the most elementary of the soul states; it is the poetry of the inert, scrape kinaesthesia, which is not intellectualised, it is not spiritualised, it is not rationalised; intensely beastly kinaesthesia; secretion of a diseased body, just as dampness is the tear of damp walls; kinaesthesia that does not differentiate from the putrid nature of autumn, of the rains and of the snow with which it blends.”¹⁹ G. Călinescu’s reply gravitates round the same orbit, but at the other extremity of the interpretation: “G.-V. Bacovia’s poetry was strangely seen as lacking any poetical artifice, as a simple, artless poetry (E. Lovinescu, A. Maniu). But it’s

¹⁶ G. Ibrăileanu, “Creație și analiză. Note pe marginea unor cărți” [“Creation and analysis. Notes on Books”, 1926], in *Opere*, vol. III, critical edition by Al. Piru and Rodica Rotaru, foreword by Al. Piru, Bucharest, Minerva, 1976, pp. 199-245.

¹⁷ G. Călinescu, *Istoria literaturii române de la origini până în prezent*, Fundația Regală pentru Literatură și Artă, Bucharest, 1941, p. 558.

¹⁸ Nicolae Manolescu, *Sadoveanu sau Utopia cărții*, afterword by Mircea Martin, Paralela 45, Pitești, 2002 [1976], p. 219.

¹⁹ E. Lovinescu, “Poezia nouă” [“The New Poetry”, 1923], in *Opere*, vol. IX, edition by Maria Simionescu and Alexandru George, notes by Alexandru George, Minerva, Bucharest, 1992, p. 321.

precisely the artifice that strikes you and definitely builds its value. In fact, on the whole, it is a relocation, sometimes bordering on pastiche, of French symbolism, with the difference it's made on the temperament of a Traian Demetrescu."²⁰ Like with Mihail Sadoveanu, this contextualisation will be radicalised, several decades later, by Nicolae Manolescu, who, nonetheless, reverses the meaning of the bookish metamorphosis: from mimetic (at Călinescu), it becomes purely polemic, and leading to the wrecking of the formula rather than to its accomplishment: "At Bacovia, we may see an authentic anti-symbolism. At one end of his poetry, a disintegration of the language takes place, through syncope, through the choice of deliberately prosaic and unarticulated forms. At another end, symbolist poetics is overbid and sometimes compromised by the pathetic. The grin, the tone of sarcasm in the voice or in the manner of installing images which indicates – in an excessive manner or purely devoid of intent – the parody of decadent symbolism."²¹ Therefore, the evolution in the reception of Bacovia's poetry follows the same line of the interpretation ('natural' – 'artistic' – 'bookish') noted at Creangă and Sadoveanu. Apparently, there's nothing new. Nevertheless, halfway through the 1980s, an interesting phenomenon is seen in Bacovia's case. Not only that the poet's integration in symbolism (or, generally, in modernism) is challenged, but the author's verse is increasingly praised for his last volumes, rejected bluntly or simply ignored by the previous critics. The tone of the new perception was set by Ion Bogdan Lefter, who emphasised the prosaic, anti-metaphorical nature of Bacovia's last volumes, and concluded that the poet "has travelled the road of the transition from modernism to postmodernism"²². Along the same line, Gheorghe Crăciun will see in G. Bacovia the first indicator of the Romanian 'transitive' (non-metaphorical) poetry: "Between the learnedness of the artificial, paroxysmal lyrical attitudes in the first two volumes and the biographical unaffectedness of his speech in *Stanțe* [...] a path is travelled, which is the path of the (post)modern poetry itself."²³ Such a reading moves away both from Lovinescu's interpretation (this time, the 'unaffectedness' of the discourse is the outcome of an aware embracing of the formula) and from that of Manolescu (prosaism is not only a polemic strategy; it involves an important existential value). In other words: "Only now can we talk about a total indiscernible nature between poetry and existence"²⁴.

Several conclusions

The previous examples lead us to several important conclusions. One of them is the fact that the 'subfield' analysed above (i.e. the 'natural' – 'artistic' – 'bookish' axis) may be a relevant operator in the description of the evolution of critical readings in the Romanian literature of the last century. Certainly, there are more complex situations (for example, Eminescu or Arghezi), whose detailed discussion goes beyond the intent of this article; as there is partial obscuring, because of the opacity of one or another of the categories

²⁰ G. Călinescu, *Istoria literaturii române de la origini până în prezent*, ed. cit., p. 627.

²¹ Nicolae Manolescu, *Lecturi infidele*, ed. cit., p. 73.

²² Ion Bogdan Lefter, "Postfață: Bacovia – un model al tranziției", in G. Bacovia, *Poezii. Proză*, Minerva, Bucharest, 1987, p. 241.

²³ Gheorghe Crăciun, *Aisbergul poeziei moderne*, with an "Argument" from the author, afterword by Mircea Martin, Paralela 45, Pitești, 2007 [2002], p. 139.

²⁴ *Idem*.

mentioned. But we could hardly find examples from which any of these paradigms is utterly absent. Even at Ion Barbu, who was read almost exclusively by applying the ‘artistic’ grid (all his monographers, ever since Tudor Vianu, have done it) or the ‘bookish’ one (Marin Mincu and Ioana Em. Petrescu), we can identify certain elements of an implicit ‘naturalisation’ (for example, in E. Lovinescu’s study *Poezia nouă*).

At a somewhat higher level of analysis, I believe that the perspective described here can validate an alternative history of literary criticism, this time not written from the standpoint of theories and methods, but from the point of view of the reading and of the options undertaken *de facto* on the field of the analysis. The three concepts used for illustration can be, certainly, accompanied by many other ones, in order to provide a more authentic image of the diversity and complexity of the ‘subfields’ that divide the space of the critical reading. Furthermore, the ‘vertical’ vision approached in the above presentation (‘how did critics read the author *x*?’) ought to be supplemented by a ‘horizontal’ description (‘how did the critic *x* the authors on whom he wrote?’), able to indicate both the unity and the specificity of the readings carried out by a certain critic²⁵.

Nevertheless, the most important consequence of this perception is the possibility of considering in an even manner the picture of the evolution of the literary genres, from which criticism has often been excluded or discretely marginalised. It is not by accident that I’ve insisted on the turn registered during the 1980s in the interpretation of Bacovia’s poetry: it is, as it can be checked easily, perfectly synchronous with, if not even triggered by the transition of the Romanian literature from neo-modernism to postmodernism. Obviously, the ‘bookish’ vision (broadly used by the ‘reflexive’ and mannerist Romanian literature of the 1960s-1970s) is, in the ninth decade, not necessarily annihilated, but in any case rectified by a prose-rendering tendency claiming to be ‘natural’. Thus, the literary paradigm shift explains the critical paradigm shift. Ultimately, each era (re)creates the literature of the past in its image and likeness. This statement is confirmed by two other examples at hand. First, if we follow the dispersion of the above three categories in the discourse of the most important Romanian critics, we can note easily that, in the interpretive and evaluative practice, at Maiorescu the ‘natural’ prevails, at the inter-war critics (particularly Lovinescu and Călinescu) – the ‘artificial’, and at a Nicolae Manolescu – the ‘bookish’. Second, such a distribution is not without a tie to the evolution as such of the Romanian literature during the last century: the ‘natural’ – ‘artistic’/‘artificial’ – ‘bookish’/‘livresque’ axis is surprisingly matched by the sequences ‘Doric’ – ‘Ionic’ – ‘Corinthian’²⁶ (in prose), respectively (post)romanticism –

²⁵ As it can be seen, the concept of ‘history of critical reading’ that we tried to develop in this paper shares a series of notes with the well-known ‘aesthetics of reception’ theorised by the ‘Konstanz School’ (see, for instance, Hans Robert Jauss, “Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory” [1967], in *New Literary History*, Vol. 2, No. 1, Autumn, 1970, pp. 7-37). However, the main purpose of our project is not to follow the empirical variation in the reception of the works, but to extract, from the ‘applied’ interpretations, the *invariants* that define a certain critical (and, by extension, cultural) paradigm. From this point of view, the ‘history of critical reading’ resembles to a greater extent to what Adrian Marino called ‘the criticism of literary ideas’ (cf. *Critica ideilor literare*, Dacia, Cluj-Napoca, 1974), with the essential difference that, unlike Marino’s ‘ideas’, our categories are not borrowed directly from the theoretical discourse, but extracted, through an inductive method, from the ‘applied’ criticism.

²⁶ The concepts ‘Doric’, ‘Ionic’ and ‘Corinthian’ were theorised by Nicolae Manolescu in his *Arca lui Noe. Eseu despre romanul românesc* (100+1 Gramar, Bucharest, 2004) and they match, broadly, the ‘social’ novel that adheres to Balzac’s model, the ‘psychological’ novel inspired by Proust’s model, respectively the metanovel.

modernism – neo-modernism (in poetry), whereas the resurrection of the ‘natural’ in the literature of the last two decades can be correlated with the ‘biographist’-postmodern Romanian literary revolution. Obviously, such an – regrettably schematic – representation requires various detailed discussions, concerning certain delays, distortions and substitutions. However, we think that, along its main lines, it renders a plausible image of the dynamics of the Romanian literature during the last century and that such a method of analysis could be applied successfully in the study of other literatures as well.

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