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THE CRITICAL IDENTITY FROM THE 1960s THROUGH THE 1980s. A CASE STUDY: THE *SECOLUL 20* MAGAZINE

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Abstract: *Translations and the intelligentsia's endeavour to regain the critical discourse marked the representation of literature and the evolution of Romanian literary criticism starting the 1960s. Starting 1961 through the 1980s, covering therefore more than two decades, the Secolul 20 monthly was published bearing the subtitle "A magazine of world literature" and featuring articles and case studies which made most of the vulnerability of the notion of realism. In this paper, our goal is, therefore, to see to what extent literary critics adopted or, on the contrary, rejected the discursive metamorphoses of the moment.*

Key words: *20th century, critical identity, essay, feuilleton, literary event.*

1. Introduction

The *Secolul 20* publication was founded as a magazine of world literature edited by the Writers' Union of Romania. It came out monthly, starting January 1961, in a book format. Its first chief editor was Marcel Breslaşu, between 1961 and 1963, followed for almost three decades (1963-1990) by Dan Hăulică. Starting with its first issue in 2001, the *Secolul 20* magazine changed its name into the *Secolul 21* magazine, "a periodical of synthesis, human sciences and the dialogue of cultures". Along the years, the *Secolul 20* proved to be a publication which made possible the articulation of a critical consciousness connected to European theories on art and literature. The magazine navigated as a ship among the cliffs of communist ideology, permanently endeavouring to keep up its aesthetic autonomy and its calibre. The magazine fundamentally changed its profile in the 70s, becoming a publication of synthesis in which the critical, exegetical coordinate prevailed. Its archaeology came from the apprehension of a new type of relation to literature, based on an ongoing effort to synchronize with literary formulas and species. Translations, synthesis papers, thematic clusters and any reactions stirred whenever a certain author or another was published were instrumental to the survival of this magazine and honoured its initial goal, namely to be a publication of "world literature". At that time, fierce programmatic battles were waged between the two hostile sides represented, on one hand, by the *Săptămâna* magazine (Eugen Barbu, Vadim Tudor and others) and, on the other, by the *Secolul 20* magazine (Dan Hăulică, Ştefan Aug. Doinaş etc.), *România literară* weekly and some provincial magazines (*Echinox*).

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The year 1961 marked, on the literary level, a moment of political recuperation, as it opened up to world literatures, in the wake of the Innostranaia literatura magazine. Several satellite countries allowed the publication of magazines that followed the model of the afore-mentioned one; nonetheless, the *Secolul 20* always fought to keep up its autonomy and not to become a literary review. At its 100th issue the anniversary, Dan Hăulică insisted on the original character of this publication, put in relation with the activity of translation and critical synthesis: "each [issue], exuberant or more austere, and all together composing themselves like a vital growth scheme. One hundred issues, which published tens of novels and stories, tens of plays and numberless poems, pages of translations and explanatory comments, pages of critical synthesis, over 19,000 pages in all" (Hăulică, 1969, 3). Not only the books – *habent sua fata libelli* – but also the magazines have their fate, "which store up together a collective endeavour, an ambition toward culture, speaking up for the spirit of the entire community" (Hăulică, 1969, 5). This magazine's role was displayed, on one hand, in the variety of initiatives to be synchronous with the literature of that time (translations, critical studies, thematic issues etc.) and, on the other, in the dissolution of ideology at the level of the articles "on the line". The editorial team (Dan Hăulică, Ştefan Aug. Doinaş, Geta Brătescu *et. al*.) were always supportive of the exegetic characters of the articles, the frequency of translations and critical studies. The editorial board was made up, along the years, by Mihai Beniuc, Maria Banuş, Savin Bratu, Marcel Breslaşu, Paul Georgescu, Mihnea Gheorghiu, Eugen Jebeleanu, Mihai Novicov, Zaharia Stancu. They were joined in time by Ion Brad, Ov. S. Crohmălniceanu, Georgeta Horodincă, Tatiana Nicolescu, Florian Potra *et alii*.

Thematic clusters were meant to bring together, besides the "direction" already established, papers voicing personal opinions, sometimes quite daring, which generously unveiled potential research vistas. To this end, worth mentioning is the concern for large-scale epic species, as early as its first issue: Mihnea Gheorghiu, "What Is Going on with the American Novel?" (1961), Elena Vianu and Savin Bratu, "«The New Wave» in the French novel", Tatiana Nicolescu, "Perspectives in the Soviet Novel". Other issues dealt with the metamorphoses of poetry, either the "«Adventures» of French poetry" or the relation between translation and innovation, or the way literature itself relates to the event. Another course of research is the study of poetry: either in the critics' and theoreticians' studies or in the translators' interventions, poetry stands out as a niche to bring to the fore aesthetic attributes. The diversity of species, the rehabilitation of reality and the variety of topics define a new poetic direction. If, in the case of Romanian poetry, the tendency is to legitimize a new lyrical discourse, as regards the translations, what matters is that the texts should be accessible or, at least, be commentated upon by a thorough and subtle audience.

2. The Essay and the Feuilleton

Most of the critical papers fell under the incidence of the essay and the feuilleton. The search for "synchronization" was manifest, reaching out sufficiently to define, in the midst of conceptual deliberations, a new relation between literary criticism and history, mainly between "interpretative and value-oriented criticism", through a shift in critical cannon and the vision on literature. Therefore, a species well-represented from 1960s through 1980s, the critical essay allowed, besides a

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subjective presentation of the theme under discussion, the opening up toward an arborescent representation, the display of a "reading system" likely to maintain the appetite for novelty and value. At that time, the polemics engendered the edulcoration of the notion of realism, the inclusion of the notion of proto-chronism in cultural debates, in tandem with the idea of Europeism and, later on, with that of synchronization (after 1977). What matters most is that, along with the concept of "realism" (derived from socialist realism), a new, somewhat "evasionist" approach cropped up, which did not pursue any ideological orientations but rather aesthetic approaches to literature; furthermore, the debates around the problematic of modernism, the idea of "literary history" (*Cahiers roumains d'études littéraires*, 1976) and "history of literature", synchronization, method, (scientism) and impressionism became more and more fervent. Also under discussion was the relation between polemics and censorship, because "censorship is, besides the limitation of the right to information and the freedom of expression, the most efficient means to level up the track of any propagandistic message. That is why, the harshest moments in the application of censorship coincide the big propagandistic actions" (Petcu 13). After 1968, some articles "on the line" are enough to have other (more daring) papers dedicated to literary topics (of course, on condition they do not formulate ideas contrary to the regime). The relation between ideology and literature is cast into comments and reviews which, on one side, mirror ideological tendencies and, on the other, paradoxically, have the effect to stifle the ideology; to a great extent, ideology is consciously consumed, reined off by comments, reviews and columns.

Moreover, the import of new concepts from Western literature (American or Anglo-Saxon), triggered a kind of exotic, enticing yet dangerous "cultural shock", since the attempt at synchronization brings about the rapprochement to innovating tendencies and directions: worth mentioning are the papers by Horia Bratu, "What «the beat generation» is" (1961) and by Mihnea Gheorghiu, "An American Balance-Sheet" (1961), starting from writers interested in society, war, various dramas (William J. Lederer and Eugene Burdick, Vance Packard, F. L. Nusser, Julius Horwitz, Ira Henry Freeman, Jack Kerouac, Richard Matheson), followed by some literary profiles from Soviet writer Konstantin Fedin (described by Dinu Săraru) and the Chinese one, Lu Sin (presented by Ion Vitner), to Roger Martin du Gard (outlined by Silvian Iosifescu) and William Faulkner (through the eyes of John Howard Lawson).

The "Synthesis and Profiles" columns bring together articles featuring diffuse images of a puzzle that was restructured along the years, undermining the role of ideology and maintaining an as tight brake as possible, to any intrusions to contaminate the literary space. Also recurrent are the studies on the importance of comparative literature, together with an entire conceptual inventory, trends, filiations and theoretical claims. In this sense, we can mention Al. Dima's contribution on "The Concept of World Literature" (1962), along with Julius Dolansky's opinions, who in an homonymous article, focused on the origin and current meanings of this notion, starting from Marxist-Leninist representations, and N. I. Popa's articles, who noticed that "the discussions around this topic and the methods to study the works deemed to be of world value called for the thorough research of historical

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links among various literatures: the circulation of ideas, the literary influences exceeding national borders and related to specific socio-political conditions or simple parallelisms of ideological attitudes and currents" (p. 109), the more so as the success of facile novels do not display the conditions of universality. Quite often, the articles present *in extenso* a method to study any interferences and influences in the history of world literature, but mainly they plead to study comparative literature.

3. The Fantastic Literature

In general, the variegated topics manage to capture the reader's interest as they also present connected subjects; the issue dedicated to scientific-fantastic literature falls under the sign of a sociological infusion; the triumphalist attitude follows a political tradition frozen into its project, which seems to endure and acquire ever greater strength: in "The Century of Communism", the eternal values of humanity – peace, freedom, equality, collective well-being – are loaded with different meanings. Generally speaking, the theme of the fantastic eludes the idea of realism and suggests new aesthetic representations. To this end, we mention Zoe Dumitrescu-Buşulenga's contribution on "Edgar Poe and the Exact Fantastic", in which she noticed that "incessantly swinging between dream and reality, between free fantasy and strictly geometrical reasoning" (1964); the section dedicated to "The Natural Fantastic", with essays by Roger Caillois, Ernst Jünger and Dan Hăulică; the theme issue on "The Fantastic – between Theory and Expression" with texts by Roger Caillois, Victor Ivanovici, Virgil Tănase and Răzvan Teodorescu (1973). Such studies open up a new vista for the interpretation of fantastic imaginary. Textual engineering, the way space picks up new semantics, the swinging between *play* and *word,* between *experience* and *expectation*, all these become landmarks of a new fantastic "poetics". Sometimes, fantastic literature has recourse to a semiotics of non-sense, supported by the reference paradoxes, by clues deprived of pertinence and validity, by collages or verbal clichés. At other times, the alluvional discourse turns into logorhea or a simulacre of dialogue.

The interest is also obvious in "The Police and Detective Literature", which marks a hiatus between ideological premises of socialist realism and the fidelity of auctorial representations. Therefore, the tendency toward the ludic, the word play, and also the accessibility of the language are the trademark of a new literary "species", honoured by writers such as Jean Richepin, Max Jacob, Jean Genet, Dashiel Hammett or the glosses on detective novels, signed up by Roger Caillois, Mircea Ivănescu, Iordan Chimet, Ov. S. Crohmălniceanu and Dinu Pillat.

4. The Literature and the Event

Concepts-succedanea are revitalised – instead of the "memorialistic literature", tabooed and deemed to be illicit, the "literature of reminiscence" sygtagma is permanently put in relation with the present-day, with the social, lurking like a predator to sniff a possible thrust of the unpredictable – and are used to build a bridge between inter-bella criticism, the avant-garde literature and the then criticism, which was "the trustee of an altogether new" literature, a novelty confined, however, within already accepted margins. Noteworthy is the phenomenon of "mimetism", which provided the editorial board with that gateway to publish texts unpublished

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before, to host reviews and discussions about Romanian literature versus world literature. In addition, tutorial personalities of Romanian and foreign literature are revitalised, such as I. L. Caragiale, Ion Creangă or writers less known to the common reader (the Romanian writer of French expression Panait Istrati or the Spaniard Pío Baroja), Among the Russian classics (Lermontov, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Gogol, Maxim Gorky etc.), are translated fragmentarily or studies are dedicated to writers from various cultural epochs: French (from Gustave Flaubert, Paul Valéry, to Marcel Proust and Pierre Emmanuel), German (Günter Grass), Americans (from Wallace Stevens to Kurt Vonnegut), English (from Jonathan Swift to James Joyce), Czech writers (Milan Kundera, before he emigrated to France, in 1975, when he became *persona non grata* to the regime).

At the same time, we can notice the vigilant watch of the ideological trustees, who insisted on "the phenomenon of the continuously growing prestige of Romanian literature abroad, a literature which, through its lofty, inspired message is reaching the orbit of world circulated values" (Simion 80). The magazine is, moreover, interested in keeping a balance between "universal and national in contemporary literature". From 1971, we can detect a higher tension between the literary space and the context, as the texts on the relation between history and event, between reality and fiction grew in number, in this way illustrating the major concerns of literary critics and theoreticians. All these debates have a common denominator: the issue of historicity, the rhythm and structures of a variegated literature, permanently chiselling its landmarks.

5. Conclusions

Without any recourse to decorative whims, creativity and rigour became "the logo" of this publication, which constantly avowed „a laborious effort" to put before the reader "not a hybrid primer of problems, but rather a context of experiences and structured converging information: a culture lived, in an active and noble sense, in the affluence of genuine confrontations, at the altitude of a given informational scruple and a will of synthesis" (Dan Hăulică 8). Also joining these ideas were Al. Philippide, Mihnea Gheorghiu, Eugen Barbu, Roger Caillois, Michel Deguy, George Steiner, Ernst Jünger *et al.*, who underpinned, in their turn, the pertinence of the studies, the quality of translations, the novelty and variety of topics. The early 60s orientation, with the permanently necessary references to the Soviet literature was quite different from that of the 70s.

In view of the afore-mentioned arguments, we can say that the *Secolul 20* publication is both a beacon for the studies and translations made at that time, during those periods of censorship (and those of ideological detente) and also a real landmark recording the evolution of Romanian literary criticism and its relation with ideology, marking during those decades the close relation between criticism, theory and literary history. Analytical symmetries, the attempt to find a point of balance and the endeavours "to be synchronous" with world literature and critical studies (be them structuralist, archetypal, the sociology of reading and culture etc.) illustrate a consistent, lucid project, which rejected the "convenient reflexes turning books into mere consumer goods, a kind of intellectual *chewing-gum*, chewed according to a mechanics without any horizon" (Dan Hăulică 5). The pleading for the fantastic, corroborated

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with the strategies aimed to defeat "duration", to theorize the function of laughter, to blow away the narrator's omniscience, changed the very representation of literature, as well as the representation about literature, breaking up the realist socialist monolith. The conceptual balance and the diversity of themes, pushing the quests into area only furtively touched upon, have always defended the dignity of reading and the studies published in this magazine, which stood up the rigorousness and the test of time.

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