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ROMANIAN POETRY IN THE COMUNISM. THE *MONDAY LITERARY CLUB*: AN INSIDE STORY

Daniel PUIA-DUMITRESCU[1]

Abstract: *The Monday Literary Club had a very important role in creating, educating, and shaping what the History of the Romanian Literature calls "Generation '80". Florin Iaru, one of the first and the most important members of this generation, tells us how he sees the activity and the role of the club within the age, but also the Romanian literature. Based on his opinion, on the one hand, the Monday Literary Club brought together very valuable people and tried to make the most of them, and on the other hand, the communist regime played a very important role in the poets' life and poetry.*

Keywords: *poetry, Monday Literary Club, Generation '80, culture, communism.*

1. Introduction

Between 1977 and 1983, has functioned, in Bucharest, at different times and locations, The *Monday Literary Club*. Although this is not a unique manifestation that age, this specific literary club has shaped and educated many of the members of what the History of the Romanian Literature will later call "The Generation '80". By this generation, Romanian poetry came to a completely different level, one that can easily be compared to those of countries who were lucky enough not to be under the *communist curtain*.

The *Monday Literary Club*, with its not very long existence, has made a difference for the Romanian poetry, and, of course, this country's cultural life. This is the reason why we should talk here, on the one hand, about the actual activity of this literary club and on the other, about the effects of the communism on the literature those days. For a better *inside* view, we interviewed one of the most well-known members of *The Monday Literary Club*, Florin Iaru.

2. Early days

After World War II, Romania saw itself cut from any sort of communication with other countries beside those whose history placed under a communist regime too. This created a large cultural gap between our country and other European ones. However, this gap did not feel this strong from the beginning. We have even had a

[1] Faculty of Letters, *Transilvania* University of Braşov.

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more relaxed period – regarding not only culture, in which we are specifically interested here – after Ceauşescu's first years as a leader, but this did not last too much, and the situation went back to the one before his arrival as a president. The situation got even worse in the '80's.

Regarding the cultural life, this was reduced to minimum – and even so, the Communist Party was trying to keep it not only under control, but also under a complete surveillance. But, of course, it is not everything dark and sad about Romanian culture that age. There were quite a few places where Romanian writers could meet and stay active, maybe with just a little bit more care and some compromises.

One strong and important meeting place for those mentioned above was the "Junimea" Literary Club, lead by Ov. S. Crohmalniceanu. Its only *problem* was – for the poets – that it focused on prose. This is why it felt the need for a club which should focus on poetry. Therefore the idea of a Poetry Literary Club came to people's minds.

Florin Iaru tells us: "Around 1976, we were trying to get together in a more professional place, not because "Junimea" – coordinated by Ov. S. Crohmalniceanu – wouldn't have been good enough for us, but this literary club's focus was on the prose and, as *naughty youngsters* as we were, we were thinking we are not actually understood… The most intrigued was Radu Calin Cristea. His theory was that we have to "take cover" somehow. This was the reason for bringing to discussion the name of the vice-dean, Hanţă, but this character was too narrow-minded… Then it came to us the name of Dodu-Balan (Oh, my God!)… Thank God, these two thought we were not only some modernistic pricks, but also with no talent or perspective, and somehow dumb. This way we came to Nicolae Manolescu. It seems that in his job's description from the dean's office he had also the obligation of working with *problematic youth*. And this is how it stayed. But further my memory could play me some tricks: some say it started on the 3rd of March, others, on the 4th, same month, same year, or same time with the earthquake…" [1]

Asked if this kind of an event was a trend that age, Florin Iaru answered: "There was more the need of identity, then a trend. There was the impression of something *new*, *innovating*, a Romanian feeling, not one of the Romanian being, but of Romanian poetry. And there was the need for discussions, for thinking, for strategy, for friendship. Once again, it felt like the *firefighting* way of the official so called *literary clubs*, the well-known way of thinking of this age couldn't understand what we were doing."[2]

The Romanian poet, Andrei Bodiu, also talks about this: "the literature of the literary clubs, either in Bucharest, or in Iassy, Timisoara, Cluj and Brasov, had become more and more important. Not only because it was a reason for writers' meeting, but also because it was the final form of communicating literature that age."[3]

This kind of events started being very popular that period, partly because of the value of their members, but partly also for the "breath of fresh air" they brought into a very difficult period of oppression and censorship. This is why literary clubs like *The Monday Literary Club*, *Junimea*, but – even more – the well-known (but, pitifully, not from the same reasons, regarding value) Adrian Paunescu's *Flacara* gathered together even hundreds of people. This is why we asked Florin Iaru if this sort of event could still be called a "literary club". His reply was: "We have always called it *a literary club*. Strange enough, there was at least one good reading for each meeting; and this for a whole year. Or two… How many were we in the

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beginning? I don't know, twenty? Then the numbers went quickly to forty or fifty. We were never more than seventy. These were the numbers. We were advertising it. We were very proud for the feeling that *something is happening*."[4] The need for something new, for something different than the Communist Party's way of seeing things is one of the reasons that made this kind of *movements* so popular.

Florin Iaru is talking about what was going on at a club meeting, the actively involved participants, the real disputes over texts, and their continuation long after the meetings were ended: "There were going on things like those which go on when everything goes on right. Basically, there were three readings. Then the miracle: excellent, cutting-edge, discussions. We were constantly learning to be logical, sharp, taking into account the most important books (not necessarily those coming from the structuralism), the living feeling of the affiliation to the great poetry. The discussions were professional – and because of this, without gloves. There was some kind of greatness. And all these were possible because there were around twenty poets, each one with a strong voice. Obviously, we took the discussions over to a drink, wherever we could find a pub open after ten in the evening. One couldn't have enough at the literary club. That was only for starters. It was followed by the uncertain discussions, by the exploration, the explanation, or the *sincere* demolition. Make no illusions. We were uncertain. And only the uncertainty is creative."[5]

3. Mentorship and creativity

As Florin Iaru said above, the Romanian poets gathered together with the purpose of creating a poetry-focused literary club have looked for a coordinator for quite a while. They have tried to find him at the Faculty of Letters in Bucharest, and then anywhere else one man like this could be found. In the end, they did not find only a coordinator, but also, and even more important, a **mentor** – Nicolae Manolescu.

He "was a very good mentor. Tons of opinions have been written on this subject. I started thinking that Manolescu first came because he had no choice. And then he stayed because there were very good texts read. He asked some of the brilliant minds of the Romanian culture to come and listen to what was read there. He wanted to share what he discovered; or what discovered him. Then he was really surprised to find an already built critical language, unprecedented fact – at least among those of his contemporary literary world. This was what he enjoyed the most, I think, altogether with the conviction he had encountered a vein of poets which only if you are very lucky you can meet. He was very well-balanced when it came about judging; and also very careful. Although we respected him as a thin lipped idol, there was no hesitation when there was a reason for battling him. I suppose those times something fundamental changed into his way of thinking, and he enjoyed seeing that. He had something that belonged only to him – a literary club resembling to the "Junimea" or the "Sburătorul". On a daily basis, we agreed and then laughed out loud. I also think that period was the time when we laughed the most, the best and the healthiest in the Romanian literature. I should specify: we didn't necessarily laugh to stupid things, but mostly to the good ones, those which transgressed the serious monopole of the "great" literature."[6]

Nicolae Manolescu himself, in an interview with the "Observator cultural", talks about the difficult period when the Romanian *Generation '80* came to light: "The *Generation '80* made her way in a time of extremely difficult conditions.

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Unlike the writers of the 60's, who were lucky enough to be the witnesses of a liberalization decade and entered the front door, they had to enter the back door, and had to live the darkest communist decade in our country. This fact influenced them, their states of mind, and – generally speaking – their literature: many did not have their literary debut when it should have been, many have not published the books they should have had when they should have had[7]." But despite all these problems, Manolescu helped them as much as he could, and in the end, they have succeeded. This is also part of the role of a mentor – to help his *disciples* coming to light.

Therefore, the poets have struggled for a literary club of their own, for a mentor, and for a different, a revolutionary way of writing. Was there a *trend* they have created? Was there one of the participants' influence more important? Florin Iaru says: "There was and there wasn't. Let's take them one at a time. The one who succeeded one evening was celebrated like a hero. He was quoted, but not imitated. Because there were at least as many directions as there were good poets. Therefore, we are not talking about a trend. It was a common idea, instead: that poetry has to be written in the city, with what *the client* brings, sometimes even from sentences of the classics; that it represents *the new sensibility* (a term first used by Traian T. Coşovei); that language is obscure, but also transparent, but that the expression has to stay memorable. Today, after 30 years, one can see better than now that you couldn't mix the poets up. (That was the most important traditionalist or official critique – that we are Americanized, that we make fun of everything and at all times.) We were having fun with great verses which have nowadays almost completely lost their joy: Stratan, Muşina, and Vişniec... Each one had his moment of glory exactly when they didn't expect it."[8] If we look back – or even if we take the contemporary Romanian poetry – they should have been *trend setters*, and there is nothing wrong about this. Actually, we continued, and asked Florin Iaru about his own perception regarding others' poetry, and the connections between him and other members of *The Monday Literary Club*: "In the beginning, as any teen, I had a better perception of my own poetry. Then the stars': Vasile Poenaru, Dinu Adam, Katia Fodor, Mihai Peniuc, and many others. I was dreaming to be like them, so they were an example for me. That was why I was always looking for new themes, situations, and metaphors. Afterwards, when in my twenties, I started seeing poetry differently. I started seeing the great, the modern poetry. Only when I read E. A. Poe's "The Philosophy of Composition" on the creation of "The Raven", I came to see some *theoretical light*. Surrounded by contemporary poetry, and sunk into the same wash-bowl of ideas, I learned how to see the difference. Those times, good verses stuck to my mind. It was a sort of a boiling pot: we were reading poetry to each other at the *Capşa, Trocadero, or Union* (don't you think we've had money: 3 lei for a coffee and a beer – for the entire day), we were literally jumping for joy for a good verse, and if there was a whole poem I liked, I would've left home determined to write a better one. It was a sort of a *socialist competition*: who's bringing the best poem of the day?"[9]

Another important member of *The Monday Literary Club*, from its early days, Mircea Cărtărescu, talks about the goal of his generation's poetry: "A more sincere, more humane poetry, least conventional, more open-minded to the existence and style, and last, but not least, a little bit more *reading-friendly* – this is what we were looking for."[10]

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4. Communist influence

The communist Romania was not the best place to be, but – for a poet – neither the worst. This is because of the fact that the worst situations could become the most fertile ones when it comes about creativity. We asked the poet about the role of the communism in his evolution, and about the frequent presence of the Special Services at the club meetings. He replied: "Do you want to talk about the role? It had the most important role. Like the most important role of a guardian in his prisoner's life. About the surveillance – we sort of knew about it. What could we actually do? We laughed. It was a threatening, but inferior presence. One cannot escape fear, but by laughing. I remember that, in 1985, when they were already keeping an eye on me, I gave a book (a man has to hope, otherwise why is he human?) which came back with a no answer and with the advice to behave. Mircea Nedelciu made the best compliment for me: "I thought you will back off and spoil your book (he was talking about "I'm going nuts and I'm sorry"). Well done!"[11]

Andrei Bodiu comes with an interesting view over this period and the communist influence: "the literature of the 80's is about affirming values completely different from the official ones. Here we could talk about the idea of *individual* and *individuality* opposed to *collectivism*. Apparently paradoxical, the members of this generation proved themselves a solid group in affirming individuality, in affirming identity. Nonetheless talking about the *self*, about *me*, was a revolution compared to the official ideology which was all about the idea of a *one body, one will* country. By placing the individual – with his fears and dreams – in the literary foreground, was a subversive action. Nevertheless, the new attitude, opposed to the communism, did not become, but later and isolated, action against Nicolae Ceauşescu's despotic regime."[12]

5. Conclusions

The Monday Literary Club is not only an important event for the Romanian literature in the communist regime, but also – or even more important – one of the turning points of the history of the Romanian literature.

We think that Florin Iaru's inside view made us understand better the two directions we said we will follow through this article – the activity of *The Monday Literary Club* and the communist influence over the literature of the period.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

1 Daniel, Puia-Dumitrescu: *Interview with Florin Iaru*, manuscript.
2 Idem.
3 Andrei, Bodiu, *Direcţia optzeci în poezia română (Direction ,80 within the Romanian Poetry)*, Piteşti, Paralela 45 Publishing House, 2000, p. 21.
4 Daniel, Puia-Dumitrescu, *Interview with Florin Iaru*, manuscript.
5 Idem.
6 Idem.
7 Svetlana, Cârstean: *Opţiuni individuale şi hazard. Interviu cu Nicolae Manolescu* (*Individual options and hazard. An interview with Nicolae Manolescu*), Observator cultural, (January 2001), No. 45-46.
8 Daniel, Puia-Dumitrescu, *Interview with Florin Iaru*, manuscript.
9 Idem.
10 Gheorghe, Crăciun, *Aisbergul poeziei moderne (The Modern Poetry's Iceberg)*, Piteşti, Paralela 45 Publishing House, 1999, p. 121.

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[11] Daniel, Puia-Dumitrescu, *Interview with Florin Iaru*, manuscript.

[12] Andrei, Bodiu, *Direcţia optzeci în poezia română (Direction '80 within the Romanian Poetry)*, Piteşti, Paralela 45 Publishing House, 2000, p.17.

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4. http://www.observatorcultural.ro/Optiuni-individuale-si-hazard.-Interviu-cu-Nicolae-MANOLESCU*articleID_3923-articles_details.html, Accessed: 22.11.2010.

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