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EUGEN NEGRICI AND THE RELEVANCE OF A HERMENEUTICAL MODEL

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Abstract: *Eugen Negrici's book, The Systematics of Poetry, published in 1988, proposes an overarching interpretative pattern of poetry. His theory was often neglected as it illustrates a direction of criticism that is not very well represented in the Romanian literary history, that of the scientific objective criticism. Such a view and perspective might prove useful in analysing unresolved literary debates regarding the 80s generation, as well as certain phenomena of contemporary poetry, which seems to suffer from inconsistent critical verdicts and a confusing style.*

Keywords: *contemporary poetry, literary theory, semiotics, 80s generation.*

The Romanian literary critic is an impressionist par excellence. He enjoys metaphorical volutes and the oscillation between analytical refinement and the approximations of the literary object under study in order to, of course, enrich its mystery. He is therefore stimulated by obscurity and ineffable, trying to emulate them with its own style and vision, thus rushing the epiphany through "Erlebnis". Whether or not we adhere to the considerations above, it is difficult to ignore the impression that the virulent defense of the aesthetic autonomy so frequently claimed in the Romanian history of literary criticism often means the excommunication of the objectivist, scientific forms of criticism.

Within this context and compared to the common vision of criticism in the seventies and eighties Romanian literature, Eugen Negrici's book, *The Systematics of Poetry* represents an inspiring exception because it goes against the mainstream represented by the impressionist criticism. By which, of course, I do not mean that the latter would be a priori inadequate or useless. Still, we are left with the sensation that Negrici's book published in 1988 is for those interested in the evolution of the Romanian literary criticism in the last 25 years like a mechanical implant in the flesh of a teenage soul reader. The reasons for the rejection of the "scientific" approach are quite well-known and partly justified in the light of the social and cultural Romanian history, so I won't expand on the topic.

Coming back to our problem, I think we can agree that the appetite for comprehensive theoretical models which are able to come up with criteria for validation and classification tends towards a minimum, especially when speaking of poetry. In trying to find a theoretical framework for Negrici's book, I think we can identify at least two models constructs: that of Carlos Bousoño – *Theory of poetic expression* (1952) and that of Michel Riffaterre - *Semiotics of Poetry* (1978).

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Also in recent Romanian criticism we can think about Gheorghe' Crăciun's book, *Iceberg of modern poetry,* a study I will return to. I think that besides the ambition and the scope of the project, *The Systematic of poetry* shares several premises with the two preceding models. These premises are simple in theory but have often been neglected in the actual analysis: the poem is a communication, it is unitary, it represents a semantic universe that is meant to be interpreted globally, its meaning and structure are defined in terms of the effect upon the receiver, etc.

Bousono's intends to analyze the status of poetry from a holistic perspective, as an act of communication destined to convey *the impression* of transmitting an individualized spiritual content. The first and foremost operation performed, or the first law of poetry, is the *substitution.* This substitution is generated by a negative relationship between poetry and "language" through a subtle game of interwoven functions between the modified, the altered, the substituted and the substitute, attached to certain words that play different roles. Bousoño develops a multifaceted model, naming these operators: the modified, the altered, the substituted and the substitute. Riffaterre's model relies on a double-layered understanding of the process of reading, which involves two stages: a mimetic, "normal" interpretation and a hermeneutic reading. The latter implies the triggering of a semiotic process that elevates the basic referential understanding of the text and the rather didactic discovery of a higher semantic level. The goal of his poetry interpretation is to identify the identification of the stylistic textual matrix. In order to achieve this, he makes use of to a series of deviations from the norm - either hypograms, induced by the expectations of the reader, or "ungrammaticalities" based on a dynamic remodeling of subverting the reality / the referential level.

While these two approaches are primarily aimed at the interactions between mental content and language, Negrici's view focuses on the organization of the signified. He is interested in the poetic act fundamentally defined by the rapport between the self and the world, rather than in the stylistic processes. Although he resorts to structuralist methods and defines his project by starting with the generative-transformational grammars, Negrici uses them cautiously, avoiding the risk of becoming the prisoner of a critical recipe. He also borrows concepts from Umberto Eco's semiotics (function, symptoms, consequences, circumstances, hyperfunction) and understands the creation of meaning in accordance with Iser as the sum between the productive and organizational efforts of the self and the reading effect which gives the text its final validation.

Acknowledging / mixing these perspectives in the attempt to compose a personal and flexible version by changing the angle of analysis according to the requirements of the demonstration, is both an interesting and efficient effort to create a successful synthesis. The central aim of the book lies in discovering and verifying creative patterns which Negrici calls "shaping attitudes of the lyrical I"[1]: "Between what and how the lyrical ego communicates there will be a relatively limited number of connections regardless of a smaller or larger number of tropes, modes of addressing or the value of the text"2. These connections can be grouped into three models according to the type of action performed by the lyrical I upon the world, each with different subtypes: 'structuring', 'metamorphosis' and 'transfiguration'. Although the terms used can be confusing at times since the idea of structure is implicit in the other two proposed categories as well, they are redefined and explained in the form of 'external remodeling', 'deformation corresponding to the state of self', respectively, substitution of the 'existing' with an imaginary landscape, a

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hallucinatory projection or an alternative universe. The types of translation of these existing structures which have been marked by the intervention of a shaping sensibility have a demonstrative application on the Romanian poetry from 1916 until 1975, offering both stylistic solutions (from the point of view of the lyrical I) and a risk / remedies part (understood as the risk of communication breakdowns).

These types established by Negrici can be easily associated with literary movements dating as far back in time as Romanticism. These references are only suggested by the critic, as he prefers an analysis free of the features of historicity. One of the other possibilities made available by the three models and their specific combinatorial categories is that a poet who is aware of the technique of production is able to transform the shaping matrix into a pure literary device. For example, the 'structure with added meaning' can be just a playful way for the poet to create a poem of transfiguration, of emphasizing the lack of substance or the quality of the previous model of being up-to-date. The lack of valuation of the poems under analysis is not an attempt to avoid responsibility, but rather a self-imposed neutrality of structuralist inspiration, as I already mentioned above. I believe that although the valuation criterion is deliberately ignored, it enters willy-nilly in discussion and has to be taken into account.

The premises of the critic's analysis is that, since the aim is to establish a pattern of processing which is only steered by the inertia of its own principles and since it evolves in accordance with itself, the only potential risks are not being understood by the reader or falling into predictability.

I think it's necessary to take into account the internal consistency of one chosen model. If not, we run the risk of not being able to identify the lyrical discourse in which the proposals for the models of shaping the' existing' cancel each out other due to artistic negligence or to failing to convey the 'deep structure'. Any taxonomy, even one whose author has been advised against the dangers of being too sketchy or rigid, implicitly claims a depletion of the investigated phenomenon, a closure. The value of such a model is not to be found either in its axiomatic character or in the creation of a short-sighted interpretative grid to be applied blindly, but in its ability to inspire competing theories and in its capability to invite enriching nuances, substantial derivations etc. Thus, one of the great qualities of Negrici's systematic seems to be that of reopening debates, of providing a solid tool for analysis which is useful in making both value judgments and theoretically delicate operations. From this point of view, the model proposed by Negrici is alive and fertile because it brings back into discussion two topics which I find are essential for clearing some concepts and phenomena present in contemporary poetry.

One of the blanks, or the undetermined concepts, in the theory of poetry which calls for a solution is the derivation or to be more precise, the extraction of the three models and subtypes from the more or less dialectic relationship between reality and the lyrical I. The author proposes the term "existing" and, at first, this choice seems wise since the new concept is more generous and less problematic than the term "reality". But this new concept has its issues as well, the most important being that it is too comprehensive and therefore vague. Of the two terms - the lyrical I and the existing - the latter is the weak, passive one, defined only within the context of a simple inventory of possible objects, from lunar landscapes to bees, from dysphoria to glee. At the same time, the only critic who has been mentioned in the attempt to explain the new concept is the Romanian literary critic George Călinescu.

Therefore we are left with the following question: is the concept of the "existing", the matter that the self organizes, deforms

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and sublimates **an already structured given corpus**? Doesn't it have a conceptual relevance consubstantial with the very idea of knowledge? Both for Bousoño and Riffaterre, poetry is a reactive agent, a system that precludes any other pre-made systems. It has been assumed a priori as an ontological scheme of normalcy (similar to Thomas Reid's Common Sense[3]) and is encapsulated in language itself, intrinsic to the self in the process of acknowledging the world. The poetical quality of language is born as a reaction against or as a necessity for improvement of the limitations imposed by the I-object dichotomy, which has already been encoded as a familiar experience corresponding to certain cognitive-social conventions which range from general to particular (ideologies, groups). This type of background is missing from Negrici's theory. Instead, it has been replaced by a kind of empirical chaos which requires the generative action of the poet's conscience in order to be able to embody a structure (even in a negative way, if we are confronted with a structure that signals the invalidity of any solid structures). This inconsistency becomes more evident in the definition of the subtype called "minimal structuring". The model is defined by author in these terms: "Productive thinking does not assign meaning, does not offer a perspective, does not amplify, does not transfigure, and does not replace the <<existing>>.The poet will then recount in a neutral voice what he was meant to see or will confess what he was meant to feel and experience with detachment. (...)The self disappears behind the object which is thus represented empirically. (...)" [4]

If one accepts that reality is already structured and is being conveyed as naked, without any efforts to reconfigure it by using the imaginary, then maybe the term "selection" would have been more appropriate, but this is not the main issue. There is a subtle and unexplained shift between the status of the "existing" compared with previously described models in the sense that this time it can be validated as "empirical" as well. In the absence of another explanation, the author seems to use the two terms in free variation. Even in such cases as the one at hand, in which the "existing" is not just a malleable matter mundi, it is still a weak term interesting not in itself, but relevant because the lyrical I has decided to recant its conversion (the emphasis is on the refusal itself and not on what this refusal reveals). The previous use of the concept apparently stemmed from a highly subjective and idealistic vision, which in Bousono's terms means that "the world matters only due to its capacity to produce psychological reactions"[5]. "In other words, the world disappears and is substituted by its effect on me[4]. Negrici's demonstration is convincing when applied to the poems that resonate with this view of the world. Things seem to become convoluted when it comes to presenting the "minimal structuring" model and in such cases in which defining reality as opposed to the position of the lyrical I comes into play.

In *The Iceberg of modern poetry* Gheorghe Crăciun equates his model of "transitive" poetry with Negrici's "minimal structuring" and thus steps into an unfortunately one-sided dialogue with Negrici's theory. I will not repeat here the definition of the concepts of reflexivity and transitivity, extracted from and applied to universal poetry, as developed by Gheorghe Crăciun. What seems relevant to me is that although when reviewed in their historical evolution, these two poetic archetypes are studied simultaneously like two parallel, equally legitimate trends, this simultaneity suddenly turns into a discussion on the Romanian poetry of the eighties in a non-dialectic succession. This abrupt change results from reading the poetry of the 80's generation almost exclusively in terms of the self-definitions and allegations of its members with theoretical skills. Crăciun demands legitimacy for the transitive model of the 80s generation relying (only) on his

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congeners' claims to salvage the reality, the mundane, the anthropocentrism. In addition to Gheorghe Crăciun's reproach that Negrici's examples tend to ignore the eighties' generation poets, the real stakes seems to be centered on the "minimal structuring" model, which overlaps with Crăciun's definition of transitivity. Can this be considered a representative model for the 80s generation as a whole, such as Crăciun's suggestions would indicate? Or did it already exist in the poetry of P. Stoica, Abăluță and Ivănescu, all of whom belong to the 70s generation, and are their poems analyzed convincingly from this "transitive" perspective by Eugene Negrici? In which case what has changed between the two generations? Is it possible that the problem arises precisely when it comes to define what "reality" or the "existing" is?

Defining how to approach and express "reality" (an aim which unifies the two critics' interpretations) seems to act as an essential catalyst in rearranging the sequence of creative models / formulas, if one may call them so, beyond the biographical or circumstantial categorizations.

One hypothesis (to which I adhere) is that the 80's generation did not abandon a specific shaping attitude towards reality, but an ideological rhetoric grid through which a similar reading of reality was presented. Indeed, the 80's generation rejects a supreme, metaphysical, abstract, pontifical, metaphorical vision of interpreting reality, but this rejection does not imply that these poets have suddenly switched sides and have reached the opposite pole, a point where the role of the subject as a shaping entity who reconstructs reality has been almost completely blurred. I believe that, as opposed to a blurred, transparent lyrical I, a lyrical I who is discretionary in relation to what falls within the definition (rather literate) of reality is really the mark of the standard 80s poets. This working hypothesis can make good use of Negrici's systematic because it enables clear comparisons between the (at least) nine possible stylistic variants.

Another direction is related to the critical reception of the contemporary poetry which seems to have quite confusing effects. Apparently they derive from the same desire for immersion in a sensitive critical self obsessed with creating analogical relations to the lyrical I. For quite obscure reasons, today, the classification of a poet as visionary or 'miserabilist' or 'neoexpressionist' becomes self - explanatory and a valuation criterion as well, the critical analysis appears to have ended its mission once it attaches the text to a preexisting school or after a pre-existing literary critic decided that the images used by the poet are, from time to time, impressive. Here are some critical remarks of some important and young critics, taken from reviews chronicles, true, but this kind of approach can be generalized because it seems to be a self-sufficient verdict. In the present context, re-reading of such a study as Negrici's *The Systematics of Poetry* is similar to a necessary cure of clarity.

All too often there prevails basic confusions between the meaning, themes, motifs and the lyrical I reporting to all of these, a phenomenon which occurs not only at the level of review and apparently has no predisposition whatsoever for poetry or novel. Poets are classified according to their "sensitivity" and the direction to which they claim to belong, and the reality of the text and how this text works are task left behind for someone else to handle. Ruling out these opinions is not a solution. Instead, we should be worried that the critical discourse rarely goes beyond these interpretative boundaries and, in fact, beyond trends and group labels. I think this kind of approach mistakes what needs to be explained with what in fact explains. To notice "the combination of expressionism and neobeat sources"6 is just an external finding insomuch as writing only about

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promiscuity and depression as literary devices, or about the displaying of a soft or frail sensitivity, are simply determinants of content. They do not involve poet X's attitude towards these issues, his / her particular note, the degree of originality, even in the rearrangement, modeling or reacting against these issues. Before we declare ourselves ecstatic or disappointed over the poetic "what" we'd better be careful about the "how" and to the "to what" dimensions of the text.

This sort of preoccupation may find an intelligent model in the approach proposed by Eugen Negrici and it could help us establish other connections between contemporary poets than those offered by extra-literary identifications. It would be interesting to include, for example, the "fracturism" in "a model box", to establish beyond its supporters' PR, a really consistent and coherent "world project" with its own premises and values. Such an approach would defend these new forms of poetic aggregations against the suspicion that they represent merely convenient labels serving the recognition of affinities and interests of different literary groups.

I think that what this book has in common with the other theoretical constructs of Negrici, including the *Illusions of Romanian literature,* the volume which created controversy three years ago, it is, I think, the talent and lucidity able to identify stylistic patterns and invariants, interpretative models in a world of proliferation of meanings. As far as the author's vision succeeds in shaping a *culture bound syndrome* in a book like the *Illusions of the Romanian Literature,* a syndrome defined by inertias of identity, the act of dilettantism and humoral-based critical act, his books offer as well an antidote to this syndrome.

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Notes

[1] Negrici, Eugen, *Sistematica poeziei* (The *Systematics of Poetry)*, Bucureşti, Cartea Românească, 1988, p.17

[2] Idem, p.18

[3] Or as, a more recent theorist, John Searle, puts it: "*the view that things exist in a particular way, which is logically independent of any human representation. Realism doesn't tell us how things are, only that they exist in a certain way"* in. John R. Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality,* The Free Press, 1995, p.153.

[4] Eugen Negrici, op.cit., p.93

[5] Carlos Bousoño, *Teoria expresiei poetice* (*Theory of poetic expression)*, Ed. Univers, 1975, p.141

[6] Alex Goldiş, în *Ziarul financiar, Midlife crisis-ul poeziei actuale*, ianuarie 2011.

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6. Searle, John R.: *The Social Construction of Reality*, Free Press, 1995.

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