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THE TRADITION OF EUROPEANITY IN THE CULTURAL DISCOURSE OF THE SIBIU LITERARY CIRCLE

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Abstract: *In the current paper we analyse the relations existing between the Sibiu Literary Circle and the image of the cultural mentor, Eugen Lovinescu, the spiritual connections of the writers signing the Manifesto of the Circle and the European tradition and values. In this respect, we demonstrate how, through the impressive intellectual background of the members of the Circle, the Romanian literature in 1940-1945 sets a cosmopolite dialogue with major cultures patterns, especially in the German area, through Lucian Blaga, Ion Negoitescu, Radu Stanca. Due to these authors, the issue of tradition, of rewriting the past do not inscribe in the provincial or national-messianic dimension, but, on the contrary, in that of universally fertile patterns, with catalytic effects.*

Key words: *cultural discourse, European tradition, Sibiu Literary Circle manifesto, modernism.*

1. Introduction

Revisiting the theoretical texts of the Sibiu Literary Circle makes us think of a possible comparison with the European avant-garde and neo-avant-garde manifestos. Such a comparison is supported especially by the high aspirations of the members' aesthetical and philosophical thinking, although this motivation will be based particularly on the differences between this phenomenon and the experimental, radical, extremist spirit of the avant-garde.

The idea of integrating in a broader, European, even universal tradition is not artificially added to the texts through which the members of the Circle legitimised themselves. The harmonisation with the continental cultural tradition is visible from the first pages of the *Manifesto of the Circle* (1943). We should add that this letter, in which the signatories confirm the need of contemporary authors to relate to a mentor, preserves - from the structure of the literary manifesto of the avant-garde - the coagulant image of the leader, the emblematic figure catalysing spirits. This motivates twice the appeal to Eugen Lovinescu, not just because a rhetorical scheme of legitimizing writings is unwillingly borrowed from the field of cultural production, but also because Lovinescu's personality meant at that point more than the school or party leader (as it was seen in the first decades of the 20th century).

Lovinescu was the literary critic possessing an extraordinary freedom of thought, the person who opened the horizon of Romanian culture and literature towards universality, through a "clear vision" and "a just observation of the most

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various notes, trough his generous tasting of literature samples and an intellectual balance never betrayed." His role as a founder is presented in the *The Manifesto of the Sibiu Literary Circle* by reporting his contribution – in the act of cultural construction and in the establishment of a modern literary and critic discourse – to the activity of some major international figures such as Mallarmé in Paris, Stefan George or Gundolf in Germany. In the *laudatio* paragraphs, written in a well emphasized language, marked by the metaphoric touch of the visionary imaginary - enthusiastic and reforming - we notice that what is brought to the fore is especially the refinement of literary taste and acuteness of the critical spirit, both features that the signers of the manifesto do not forget to remember even in the profile made to Titu Maiorescu, whose *sharp intelligence and good taste* "have opened for the Romanian culture, the gates to enter in the firm field of value dissociation".

The recall of Blaga's concepts, defining the reports between a major and a minor culture, is done precisely in the context of re-discussing Maiorescu's contribution to the cultural awakening, simultaneously to the political emancipation of Romanian life. The horizon opening had therefore been prepared and on the steps of this aesthetic conscious modulator the definition of the contemporary mentor is inserted, having as ideals "to separate waters, to clear the limits still obscure for the public, and with an extraordinary passion to light the young fires and maintain their combustion".

The difference between the members of the Circle and the modernist-conservative movements in Portugal or Brazil, also the sebastianist messianic nationalism (set by Fernando Pessoa) or the autochthonism of cultural antropophagism wearing the touch of devouring Europeanism (according to Oswald de Andrade's visions) is obvious in terms of our writers' reporting to the identity past or the European canonical values. A clear distance is also maintained, not just in front of these relativisations of nationalist-regressive utopias, but also in relation to an immediate tradition, that of formalist, mechanicist, futurist experimentalism, which had proclaimed an aggressive, renewal, rhetoric. All this, despite the fact that manifesto makes an option for urbanism, for a cosmopolitan culture.

The protest against past and provincialism is motivated especially through the perseverance of the "semanatorist" ideology which was justifying itself primarily in the historical-social manner. The obsolete forms and the agrarian-"poporanist" imagery, which had invaded literature at the beginning of the century, have reached saturation. Hidden under the formula of national "specificity" these are condemned as anachronistic, and thus the legitimising of the new tendency will be made through breaking and denial. The critical argument is compressed in a few essential boundaries: "In Transylvania […] crisis does not outbreak as a short-term incidence of extra-aesthetic nature, but rather displays a permanent character, with a retrograde vision and deeply harmful effect upon the artistic development". If Goga's messianism and the art, "as Romanian as possible", are rejected this is not due to the content, but especially to their becoming ideological and schematizing.

The criticism of this perseverance in the literature as a social and political instrument appears in memorable sentences: "It's an abuse which confesses the serious lack of an aesthetic awareness and good taste". Under the signatories' vehement denial of the old literature we hear Negoiţescu's critical voice. Few programmatic elements of this text from 1943 retain the major expression, essential to the cultural evolution of a critical voice (that Transylvania had not had yet, despite the influences from the philosophy of the empire). What the future critic is required is a "summum of discernment, lucidity,

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analysis and a synthetic mind". We should add: a European culture and interest in aesthetics, and also a connection to modern intellectual history. These were attributes that Ion Negoiţescu, Radu Stanca, Regman, Todoran, Drâmba, Doinaş did not lack.

The formation of the modern writer as the members of the circle understood it, must be that of a high intellectual, philosophical, literary level and this could only be assured by the urban culture, the culture of the city (even in the Platonic sense). The authors of the manifesto mention clearly the dominant way of the history of ideas, history which is governed by the proper organization/urban design: "All great cultures reached their climax within an urban environment, either national or cosmopolitan, and actually these cultures defined the 'urban' par excellence. The exaltation of rural and ethnic aspects, justifiable with social approaches, becomes a menacing vice when it tends to overwhelm the artistic phenomenon, which can only find its cultured and prosperous ambience – in the sense of a major creation – within an urban and aesthetic environment." The primacy of the aesthetic is illustrated by the exhaustive reporting to periods and cultural spaces in whose boarders the signatories want to place the local culture (from the Greek to the French model, we notice that the ambitions are not reduced just to the catalysing influence, after Blaga, of German culture).

The end of the programme mentions among the vegetal vitalism metaphors, energetic imagery highlights the organic feature and its ascendance to the European cultural matrix: "To us, Romanian literature represents neither a closed, self-contained phenomenon, nor a picturesque to the European ethnography, but rather a young shoot of the continental culture, a shoot nourished by the same sap and burdened with the same fruits, even though it put down roots in a different soil".

By this sentence, the signatories of the manifesto respond to the interest for the primary, for the ethnographic, for the collective specificity latent aspects, remembered at the beginning of the letter as belonging to the "semanatorist" programme, while now they are given the turn of the *specific* creation, "freed from the common and strictly individualised magma of personality" and anchored in the European rhythms. Major cultures are brought into discussion so as to discover universal values, beyond ethnic, folkloric, ideological particularities.

Like T.S. Eliot or Ezra Pound, who seek for the *Centre* in the culture of old Europe, a spiritual centre governed by Homer, minstrels, Dante, Villon, Catul, Propertius and so on, the members of the Sibiu Literary Circle want to overcome localism and Transylvanian "cultural imperialism", "semanatorist" anachronisms and ideological- chauvinist rhetoric by claiming their affiliation to a major tradition, which has a centre everywhere, a cosmopolitan tradition, of an urban culture, of an intercultural dialogue and of graft.

Instead of the utopian construction of something "purely Romanian, massive, having the ethic horizon as a supreme limit" (Qtd. in Guţan, 79), as it was defined by the generation contemporary to Negoiţescu, Stanca, Balotă, Regman, the members of the Circle support the integration of our literature in a "modern Europe", but also a Europe with a "millenary spiritual tradition" (*The Manifesto..*, 118).

It is about Europe as a Centre of common aspirations towards *civitas*, similar to what we saw in the statements in the 20s at Pound and Eliot. The *European idea* of literature is the one orienting Negoiţescu's writings without any partisanship to the *fin de siècle* European schools or to avant-garde models. The urbanism which represented their option was not a superficial, mimetic,

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progressive-bourgeois, mechanicist or artificial one, but a deeper one, of medieval- Renaissance experiences. It was situated beyond the "art forms manufactured in the West", beyond avant-garde battles or programmatic pathetism.

How can we still speak about programmatism at the members of the Circle?

1. They maintain an ambivalent discourse, seemingly contradictory, through the dialectic of the generation: old-new, which means they-us, but without binging again into discussion, in an unpleasant manner, the idea of literary fashion, even though they are the city bohemians for a while. They move away from the immediate past, as well as from the ancestral, ethnic, primary one, to recover it then trough the ballad genre (*Resurecţia baladei*, 1945), but also as musical, architectural and lyrical instrumentation, not as functional-ideological (like the symphonic recovery of the epopee by T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, *Four Quartets*, Ezra Pound, *Cantos,* W.C. Williams, *Paterson*).

2. They legitimise themselves through the image of the leader, but as an apollinic figure of the lucid and thorough critic, not as a visionary, possessed, cursed, prophetic one, but as an intellectual emulation force, creatively coagulating - but not in a dictatorial manner – the spirits and directions in the modern culture.

3. The tradition is repudiated, to be then found again, in the form of another, major, belonging to the European dimension, or, to lesser extent, to a European city as Sibiu, "a city with tradition. A tradition which is not only epic – condensed in the sea of our national troubles – but also a sentimental tradition" (Radu Stanca). Thus the concept of tradition at the members of the Circle is confirmed to be similar to Eliot's, which relates it to an organically achieved, reinvented, selectively and critically assumed inheritance, through comment and rewriting, as an "anxiety of influence", in Harold Bloom's words. A tradition of "artistic effervescence", alchemical synthesis, similar to the cultural life in Sibiu in 1944. Doing a review of the artistic life in Sibiu that year, Negoiţescu was writing that the city "has always been favourable to the artistic, interior, effervescence, which, be it German or Romanian, happens in conditions of continuity and specificity" (Qtd. in Guţan, 81).

In order to conclude, the spiritual foundations/ the tradition of the Circle will have a heteroclite, multicultural nature, open to contacts and contaminations, transformation and cultural hybridisation. A modelling tradition, by no way prescriptive or standardized, a catalytic tradition, but not reductive, a conservative tradition (of essential values), but not anachronistic, archaic-like. A universal tradition, not regional, cosmopolitan, not "specific", visionary in the broad sense, not messianic. A tradition of aesthetic European urbanism.

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