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# THE INFLUENCE OF THE FRENCH "NEW CRITICISM" IN THE ROMANIAN LITERARY SPACE

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***Abstract:*** *The metamorphosis of the post-war Romanian literary criticism can be described starting from the critical model proposed between the World Wars by E. Lovinescu and the "Lovinescian" literary critics, together with the modelling suggestions that came from the French "New Criticism"/Nouveau Critique. What is, nevertheless, characteristic for the Romanian criticism, is the permanent struggle to defend the autonomy of the aesthetics (on the background of the commanding Marxism), and of the axiological judgment.*

***Key words:*** *the autonomy of the aesthetics, axiological judgment, the criticism between the World Wars, the criticism after the World War II.*

## 1. The First Signs of Normality

Throughout the "defrosting" or "the small liberalization" between 1965-1971, and also all along the "thesis of July", the Romanian literary criticism preserved a certain consistency, due, first of all, to our perpetual and always actual need to maintain solidarity facing the menace of the politics and the danger to contract new extra-literary viruses. The deficit in theorizing about the concept of literary criticism after the World War II, as well as the scarcity of polemics must be attributed to the official back-ground, the only one admitted, the Marxism. Florin Mihăilescu explicitly declares, in his second volume, *Conceptul de critică literară în România* (*The concept of literary criticism in Romania)* that, despites the liberty the critical discourse was thought to be enjoying, it had to submit to a "superior, Marxist meaning" (Mihăilescu 62) and to consider the literature it analyzed in a close connection with the society that produced it: "the ideological path and the axiological judgement" (Mihăilescu 13) – these are the two imperatives of the criticism founded, by high command, on a material-dialectical directive. And because it was obliged to work in a "superior, Marxist meaning", or, in other words, in a "creative Marxist spirit" (Micu & Manolescu 22), the criticism took care to explain itself, in very carefully and very interested, at any time it was called to account for its various escapades on the forbidden land of the occidental critical methodologies (especially that of the Nouvelle Critique), by attributing to the "Marxist spirit" the maximum of complexity, a spirit which includes, latently, all the creative valences, saturated with significances. By postulating, for practical reasons, the existence of these valences, the Marxism became a conceptual umbrella of

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maximum clearance, and could shelter, this way, the most diverse exegetic practices. But because the Marxist spirit, even if made ambiguous trough the multiplication of his "creative" meanings, was watching from the shadows, no one was truly interested, after the World War II, to minutely define their own critical concept, at least not in the way it had happened between the Wars. Statement of meaning are made, in a rather chaotic and expeditious manner, in introductions, afterwords, literary inquiries or interviews, the critics showing preference for practise instead of theory. A consequence of this deficit of theory and polemic confrontation of the various formulas is the description of the criticism (and literature) after the War II, by the criteria of generations. After 1960, and until after 1990, the generations are not born any longer out of "inter and intra-generation tension", but out of "a simple alliance against the ideology or the system" (Cistelecan 69). That is why, the only true polemic which had divided the literary and cultural scene and had made all the main actors to take sides, was the proto-synchronic criticism – a new attempt of the politics, under the shape of Ceausescu"s nationalism, to control the aesthetics, to derail it once again away from its natural course.

## 2. The Critical Model between the World Wars and the Suggestions of the French "New Criticism"

The renewal of the critical discourse, starting with the second half of the '70s, is made by restoration of the critical models between the World Wars (which, in fact, also offers the foundation for the come-back to normality), as well as by the interpretative methodologies of the French "New Criticism" received, yet, in a proper manner which could be explained first of all by the autochthonous political and cultural context. While the innovators of the French criticism reacted, immediately after the War II, against the biographic-documentary positivism and impres-sionism, our critics form the generation of the 60s, at the beginning of their literary career, were forced to react to an aggressive sociological positivism like the one pertaining to the socialist realism and to seek not a change of the critical cannon, but, in a much modest and also much realistic sense, a reestablishment of the autonomy of the aesthetics. The suggestions that came, based on the criticism between the Wars, from the Nouvelle Critique, were taken up on the run, most of the times in a soft manner and from practical reasons, to sanitize the literary space. The echo of the occidental discussions on the subject of the status of the literary criticism did not reflect directly in the interpretations made in the Romanian literary space; on the contrary, the adhesion to one of them was made carefully, sometimes at the end of the process of making the meaning ambiguous, so that the philosophy that supports them to be as little visible as possible. This is because the Nouvelle Critique didn't only bring a new language, but also a new conception about the human being, fundamentally different from the Marxist one. Directed, in a phenomenological and existentialist fashion, towards the individual and concrete, the new critical methods considered the text as the expression of a subject and not in the least as one of a "class", set out to conquer "new peaks of civilization and progress".

The come-back to the aesthetic criticism is made, after 1965, by rapid, enthusiastic recoveries, burning stages, hence the often precarious assimilation of information. The renewal had impact rather on the critical style, and many had discovered now the taste of stylistic, rhetorical and narratological approaches,

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an explainable fact after the years of subject matter delirium in criticism. The perspective did not change, but, in essence, it remained profoundly obliged to aesthetics (especially to Călinescu's perspective, in a first stage), on one hand because of the constant interest manifested towards creativity in criticism, and, on the other hand, by preserving the interest for axiology. Apart form the French New Criticism (asserted in a word where the aesthetics encountered no threat), our criticism after the World War II was not at all willing to dismiss the axiological judgement. The critical verdict was still among its permanent preoccupations, so, the occidental counterparts" indifference towards axiology was always remedied by recourse to "the veritable model, the obsessive model" (Negrici 260), that is – the model between the Wars: "to fight for a cause that traced back to the period between the two World Wars seemed to be, in the '70s, the most horse sense attitude possible"; that is why "the most important competitors, endowed with permanent columns in newspapers, imagine themselves to be the scions of the main lines of the pre-communist criticism, to be the ones chosen to embody the unfinished destiny of a Călinescu (N. Manolescu), T. Vianu (Matei Călinescu), E. Lovinescu (E. Simion). G. Ibrăileanu (M. Ungheanu) or Titu Maiorescu (a collective dream)" (Negrici 259).

## 3. Group Photo of the French "New Criticism"

Distinguishing himself even from the 50s (so, much before the beginning of the polemic between the universitarian Raymond Picard and the structuralist Roland Barthes, in 1965, considered the birth of the "New Criticism"), the new critical vision of the literature was born, in the French cultural space, as an anti-classical, anti-rationalist and anti-positivist reaction, numbering among its first representatives the ones grouped as "the School from Geneva" (M. Raymond, A. Béguin, then J. Rousset and J. Starobinski, G. Poulet and J.P. Richard), then their forerunners as M. Blanchot and G. Bachelard. G. Picon was also included in the new formula, despite the fact that his opinions were substantially different. They were all practitioners of a type of criticism called "interpretative", focused on the potentialities and the infrastructure of the text, to which some of them attributed existentialist connotations. The opposite party, of the positivist universitarians, regards them highly at first, not tracing any menace from their part until the pens start to sting. The conservatives (the antiques) retort only to the moderns manifestations, gathered around R. Barthes, who do not bring forth only new critical instruments, but also question the critical object itself (literature, literary, écriture), the condition of the critical discourse as a discourse about discourse, as meta-language. So, even from the beginning, the Nouvelle Critique wasn't a unitary movement, but it sheltered two branches: an older one, which still sees literature as a form of the human (Poulet, Richard, Starobinski, Picon), and the second where literature is the absence of human, of the subject, which dissolves in language and yields to structures that transcend it (Barthes, Genette, Lacan). Beyond these differences, one can see, on the whole, a common project of the Nouvell Critique, which starts with a change in focus, from the author towards the literary work, approached intrinsically as an autonomous universe, having a formal or sensible organizing unit. The "new critic" is

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preoccupied to describe the literary work as accurately as possible, as *"unity and totality"* (Doubrovsky 13), beyond all the existing ambiguities "at the level of *writing*, écriture, and of the writer" (Doubrovsky 76). The conscience of the multiple significances of a text is constantly doubled by the conviction that everything evolves towards a point where they converge, that beyond "the significant ambiguity, supra-determination, polyvalence" there is "a final sense" of the literary work: "unity, totality, coherence: I believe it is the common device of all the new critics, or, if you want, their common postulate. The Nouvelle Critique is not «a critic of significations», as it was asserted, but, on the contrary, a critic of the *significance*" (Doubrovsky 106-107).

G. Picon, G. Poulet, J.P. Richard, J. Starobinski and R. Barthes are only a few of the "new critics" who acted in a visible modelling way on the debuts of the 60s, and not only. Having an intellectual perspective about creation, G. Picon attributes to the critical conscience the role of the moderator between the book and its reader; the aesthetic experience implies the intelligence of the critic, who uses "his (essential and unavoidable) prejudices" about literature in order to make things clear about the value of a literary work. The aesthetic judgement is the essence of the criticism; hence, the lack of interest the critics generally show towards axiology finds no excuse with G. Picon. Allergic to the manner of dealing with literature as language, system of signs, and annoyed by an "over-spiritualized" approach, he does not accept – in *L"écrivain et son ombre* (1953) – the manifestation of the critical conscience otherwise than in and by means of the literary work. These are ideas which our Calinescian critics (especially N. Manolescu) efficiently used in their own theories.

Proving no interest for the form and recommending the phenomenological suspension of the literary work from any context, G. Poulet understands literature as the expression of a pre-existent spirituality (but on the level of the conscience) and the criticism – as an enthusiastic type of knowledge by the adherence, "identification" of the critical conscience with the conscience of the other. The critic, transformed into a receptacle, agrees with the come-to-the-existence of the work inside his own inner self by means of a happy reading-coincidence. Because literature must be lived and appreciated only, axiological valorisation is explicitly refused; the tendency to replace the inner subjectivity of the work with the objective character it has as a language is not accepted either by the author of *Etudes sur le temps humain*. In the Romanian literature, among the members of the generation of the 60s, there is no orthodox admirer of relationships of literary erotic, but semi-Pouletian coincidences with the literary work and penetrating sympathies towards it can be seen at Lucian Raicu, Eugen Simion or Ion Pop (most of the times they have a thematic approach).

For J. P. Richard, the literature begins with sensation, but it is realised through language. Similarly, the thematic critic starts with the explicit in order to discover the implicit, trying to grasp the personal mark a writer lays on the image of the world he describes, which can be identified in his writings (not outside of it, in biography or in the unconscious, as the psychological criticism does) and which does not need an "objective" confrontation with elements from outside. But the sensual dimension of a text is not the only one involved in analysis; because there is profoundness in sensation as well, from the physical contact with the world are (also)

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born ideas, the thematic line being interested in the impact of perception over the intellect. The adherence to the sensual values of a text must be followed by a look from the distance, but inside the text, by a passage to a different level of the obsessive thematic network. Understood from a thematic perspective, the literary criticism is indifferent to the contexts of the text, as well as to the question of the axiological judgement; applied exclusively to chef d'œuvres, the thematic approach solves the above mentioned question by the very choice of the analysed text. In the Romanian criticism after the War II, this formula has had a considerable impact, because it was relatively close to the luxuriance and the picturesque of the Calinescian model. I. Negoitescu was the one who experimented it extensively, inclusive in his *History of the Romanian literature*.

Completely different inside the Nouvelle Critique, R. Barthes conception ignores the subjective universe of the literary work and takes into account only its objective reality (as a system of signs) and the literary work as a significant. There are, in fact, two ages of this perspective: in the first one, the criticism is understood as a secondary language, as a meta-language which works with "validities" instead of "truths"; this doesn"t mean that anything can be asserted, but that it can be asserted anyhow, that is by the choice of the significant level (psychological, philosophical, linguistic etc.). Despite of the "airiness" of these "validities", they also let the idea of truth visible, because a certain approach of a literary text must be allowed by the text itself, as a condition of the coherence of the future demonstration. And, if there is not possible to apply any perspective to a literary work, it means that there are serious impediments in the configuration of the criticism as meta-language. That is why, in the second stage of his conception, R. Barthes does not speak about literature as language, but as a system of signs to be studied by criticism. Thus, he goes from the criticism of significances to the structuralist criticism (Doubrovsky 129), which ignores the relationship of the text with the world by dealing with it in a technical, rationalist fashion, as with an object. In this second stage, the criticism seems to be transforming itself into poetics, rhetoric, etc. Both the stages of this conception had found followers in the Romanian criticism; "the validities" have been happily corroborated by the Calinescian critics with the hypothesis of the "epic synthesis", while the genuine structuralism have been appreciated by Eugen Negrici or Livius Ciocârlie.

The plan of a comprehensive criticism which could make peace between subjectivity and objectivity, the identification with the perspective view, the intuition of the "dominating surplombantă look" was planned by Starobinski with care for the context of the literary work (firstly in *L"oeil vivant*, then in *La relation critique*). A similar ideal of critical comprehensiveness have had in our literature, Ovidiu Cotruș and Mircea Martin.

## 4. Conclusion

While the critical model between the World Wars laid the foundations for the Romanian criticism from after the War II, the suggestions that came from the French "New Criticism" (Nouvelle Critique) brought their contribution to the dynamics of the phenomena and the renewal of the

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critical devices and diversified the approaches of the literary text.

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