BEYOND THE MYTH. ROMANIAN POST-COMMUNIST REVISIONISM

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Abstract:

This paper aims to assess the challenging role of post-communist critical and theoretical revisions for the literary canon legitimized under communism. Special attention will be given, therefore, to the so-called "East-ethical revisionism", theoretical direction which, beyond the interpretative excesses involved, brings a necessary resizing of the relation between aesthetics (the autonomy of art) and ethics (the political compromise literature assumes). Although these revisions generated the most acid cultural polemics of the '90s, practical results delay so much that the analysis of their inertia becomes a substantial issue of the current Romanian canonical debate. A good way of access to these interpretative jams remains Monica Lovinescu's critical activity, because Eugen Lovinescu's daughter acquires the role of coordinator of the "East-ethical revisionism".

Keywords:

Literary canon, canonical debate, East-ethical revisionism, Monica Lovinescu, Romanian literary criticism, canonicity, canonization**.**

25 years ago, the overtowering "canon" of Romanian critical and theoretical debates was, in effect, a *counter-canon*, based on "moral" or "East-ethical revisions." Any undertakings "in favour of" a literary/aesthetic canon tended to become, thus, manifestations of a retrograde or, in any case, of a conservative *anti-canon*, which is morally culpable because it is deemed to side with the communist *status quo*. Because of these construals, which are not only terminological, but also ideological, 25 years after the December 1989 moment, the authentic configuration of "East-ethical" revisions can be understood only through a reverse reading, which may discriminate between the three dimensions these revisions entail: their programmatic premises, their "practical" results and, respectively, their

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theoretical potential. The first two aforementioned components appear in a very clear light today, while the third has remained concealed in obscurity, even though it could shed light, I believe, on the Romanian canon-related debates initiated during the first post-communist decade.

1. The ideological platform

Regardless of the name of those promoting "East-ethical revisionism" (Monica Lovinescu, Virgil Ierunca, Gheorghe Grigurcu, Alexandru George, etc.), their ideological premises were identical, at least in terms of their major objectives. On the one hand, it was suggested that the anti-communist struggle should be extended from the political to the cultural/literary sphere. The moral sieve was to accomplish the lustrations that had failed to be carried out at the social level, with a view to reaching a sort of cultural enactment of Section 8 of the "Proclamation of Timişoara", regarding the elimination, contestation or, at least, marginalization of the literary creations and of the authors who had performed similar roles to those of party activists, in reflecting the communist propaganda. On the other hand, it was necessary to reform the literary hierarchy of the post-war period because the literary canon stabilized in the 1960s-70s had been heavily indebted to the censorship and self-censorship that writers, literary critics, theorists and educational policy makers had been subjected to.

2. Practical consequences

The long-term impact of these ideological premises on the reinterpretation of Romanian post-war prose, poetry, drama, criticism and literary history has been minimal, as many researchers have convincingly demonstrated. In a 2010 essay, suggestively entitled "Iluziile revizionismului est-etic" ("The Illusions of East-ethical Revisionism"), Paul Cernat notes that "despite statements of intent, the number of critical re-readings systematically applied to canonical authors of the post-war period – obviously, from an updated, 'free' perspective – was ever so insignificant. For our literary criticism and history, these years can largely be considered to have been wasted. [...] Post-December East-ethical revisionism – which is, of course, related to criticism, but perhaps less so with literary criticism – became responsible for maintaining a deliberate, long-lasting confusion between the ethical, the aesthetic and the political, which led not only to

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vitiating many value judgments, but also to the vicious parochialization of our cultural field."[1] A similar idea – upheld by a comparative analysis of the concept of „revision" as used by Eugen Lovinescu and George Grigurcu – is voiced by Andrei Terian in the study entitled "Legitimarea revizuirilor morale. De la E. Lovinescu la lovinescianismul actual" („The Legitimation of Moral Revisions. From E. Lovinescu to Present-day Lovinescianism"): "unlike 'literary' revisions, which Ion Simuţ characterized as a 'unique,' 'uniform,' 'systematic,' campaign, moral revisions have been *limited, mixed* and *conjunctural*. Their *conjunctural* value is confirmed by the fact that Lovinescu considered them a mere expression of a particular historical moment and never attempted to expand them beyond their initial context. [...] Gheorghe Grigurcu's revisions tend to instantiate themselves in 'perpetuity.'"[2] Moreover, as Sanda Cordoș notes, ethical revisions are extraneous to the foundations of literary criticism, regardless of how ample the interpretive approach is envisaged to be: "So far, in this area, to my knowledge, only disclosures have been made, through testimonials or through the publication of document fragments from the archives. Disclosures, however, create emotions, sometimes even debates, which are very interesting in themselves, but no more than that. In short, I do not think a critic can propose an *ethical revision* of literature without great damage to the latter."[3]

3. Theoretical potential

However, even at the risk of bordering on the counter-factual, it appears that the post-communist revisionist undertaking could have had a more substantial impact if the theoretical insights provided, for instance, by Monica Lovinescu's interventions had been valorized. Despite the fragmentarism that is inherent to her critical approaches, Monica Lovinescu gradually constructs, in an effort marked by sufficient self-contradictions

[1] Paul Cernat, „Iluziile revizionismului est-etic," in: *Observator cultural* (I-III), no. 282-284, September 2010.
[2] Andrei Terian, "Legitimarea revizuirilor morale. De la E. Lovinescu la lovinescianismul actual," in: *Critica de export. Teorii, contexte, ideologii*, Bucureşti: Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române, 2013, pp. 198, 206.
[3] Sanda Cordoș, "Grija pentru nuanță," in: *Steaua*, no. 3 (749), year LXII, March 2011, pp. 21-22.

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and self-revisions, a fairly coherent conceptual platform whereby literature is evaluated and interpreted.

3.1. Canonicity vs. canonization

Briefly, albeit not necessarily reductively summarized, Monica Lovinescu's "East-ethical" conception highlights the difference between *canonicity* (the aesthetic value of a work, determined by a strictly literary analysis) and *canonization* (the cultural and social legitimation of a work/author, based on extra-aesthetic factors: political, ideological, ethical, etc.), a difference analysed by E. Dean Kolbas, in the footsteps of Theodor Adorno's "aesthetic theory."[4] As the author of *Unde scurte (Shortwaves)* almost deliberately emphasizes, in the context of the communist dictatorship, and, by contagion, in the post-communist period, aesthetic values "alone" do not establish a hierarchy, because they are sometimes subordinated to ideological interests, while at other times they remain the product of analytical grids influenced by the socio-political context. Artistic success (the proof of "canonicity") is defined by Monica Lovinescu in a classical manner, as the symbiosis between *strangeness* (stylistic and visionary estrangement), *originality* (confounding the horizons of reception) and *universality* (the ability of transcending particular or conjunctural problems). By contrast, the social and national representativeness of an

[4] E. Dean Kolbas, *Critical Theory and the Literary Canon*, Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 2001, pp. 139-140: "If canonization is the cultural process by which selected works are continually rewritten and reproduced, becoming so absorbed in a culture that they are perceived as familiar and even commonplace, then canonicity as a measure of aesthetic quality can also be the judgment of a work's radically critical potential, one which is as subversive of the status quo as it is of its own institutional accommodation. In spite of these tensions, contradictions, and ambiguities, it is possible to make some general concluding remarks without denying those tensions or forcing them into a premature and artificial reconciliation. Literature is not made in a social vacuum, and neither are its critical reappraisals. To be at all comprehensive, therefore, any critique or analysis of the canon must also include a metacritique of the claims that are made about it, an assessment of the social and material conditions of their own possibility, especially those that have done most to influence the form the debate has taken. To the extent that specific modes of production affect not only the form and dissemination of cultural works but also the discourse about them, the economic principles and ideological mystifications of capitalist society affect not only the production and reproduction of literary canons but also the rhetoric surrounding them."

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artistic creation (hence, its "canonization") is certified, in totalitarian regimes, solely by its outspoken and overt *subversiveness*: the courage of opposition to the dictatorship, the willingness to relativize dogmas, the undermining of utopias, and the promotion of liberaland democratic values.

Examples of this critical conception can be identified, throughout time, in the numerous interventions made by the editor of "Free Europe" Radio. For example, in the journals covering the last communist decade, Monica Lovinescu confesses her constant willingness to censor her critical spirit in order to voice ideologically pragmatic judgments, information being organized according to the impact it might have "in Bucharest". Terms like "strategy"[5] or "tactics"[6] are often encountered in her diarist notes. Moreover, there is almost no interview from the years 1990-1992 in which the former exile does not express the need for the dissociation, but also for a symbiosis between the aesthetic and the ethical (canonicity/canonization). At least at the discursive/declaratory level, there should be no ambiguity: "In Romania, resistance was mostly of the aesthetic type. Because of the socialist-realist past, in the period of pseudo- or quasi-liberalization, the ethical criterion and the political criterion were despised, since it was deemed that they had been placed in the service of socialist realism. Erroneously deployed, but serving it nonetheless. A literature of high quality was created, much more synchronous with what was produced in the West [...] I do believe, however, that something was missing: the contempt for ethics that I could sense from afar was somewhat harmful. Hence, the, perhaps, too great insistence in these texts of ours [...] a little annoying, in effect, on the ethical criterion and on ethics – the criterion remaining, in any case, aesthetic. I believe that Romanian literature is one of the most aesthetically refined literatures of the East, which, in broad outlines, appears to have been devoid of the ethical obsession."[7] It comes as no surprise that the much vaunted "death of the author" appears to her as a theoretical fad, which only the democratic cultures of the West can afford

[5] Monica Lovinescu, *Jurnal 1985-1988*, București: Editura Humanitas, 2003, p. 270.
[6] Idem, *Jurnal 1990-1993*, București: Editura Humanitas, 2004, p. 179.
[7] Answer to a round table of the Group for Social Dialogue, transcribed in *22*, no. 15, 27 April 1990, apud *Cronologia vieții literare românești. Perioada postcomunistă*, vol. I (1990), foreword by Acad. Eugen Simion, note on the edition by Bianca Burța-Cernat, București: Editura Muzeului Național al Literaturii Române, 2014, p. 193.

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for a limited period of time, while the "return" of the author – with all the implicit moral responsibilities thereof – becomes a necessity of Romanian literature.[8] Not once, Lovinescu, the literary exegete, proposes even identifications, at the level of vision, between the author-narrator-characters, assuming the necessary compromise of obliterating minimal narratological dissociations.[9]

3.2. The revisionist hypercanon

That is why canonical revision (a gesture of retrieval and reparation) is predicated on upheavals of the representative standing of a personality or a work for a particular moment in literary history, for a stage in the evolution of society, rather than on value detraction. Monica Lovinescu proposes, therefore, a process of interpretation (which is altogether different from judgment passing in a trial) which aims to identify, as accurately as possible, and not to obscure the impact of the moral compromises committed by the "classics" on both parts of such authors' creations and on their critical reception. The aesthetic canon is, therefore, not deconstructed but – in the words of David Damrosch[10], hypercanonized, by being purified/freed from its overtly extra-literary aspects: "the ethical, under the exceptionally dramatic circumstances of Romania under communism, does not replace the aesthetic criterion, but also joins it, like a necessary threshold [...] I do not see why "revisions" should be considered a "sanction" imposed on literature [...] Who may presume to deny, for instance, G. Călinescu's *History of Romanian Literature* if his "optimistic" chronicles and concessions are called into question? Can Sadoveanu be removed from literature if his post-war opportunism is shed light on? [...] What would Sadoveanu's work be if it were limited to *Mitrea Cocor*? There can be no sanctioning. Every culture worthy of the name – and not just in Eastern Europe, which has gone through unprecedented experiences – undertakes such revisiting or revisions of the past, as the function of criticism is to vitalize culture, not to punish. It is only in Romania that the

[8] Monica Lovinescu, *Unde scurte III. Posteritatea contemporană*, București: Editura „Humanitas", 1994, pp. 334-341.
[9] Passim. Idem, *Unde scurte IV. Est-etice*, București: Editura „Humanitas", 1994.
[10] David Damrosch, "World Literature in a Postcanonical, Hypercanonical Age," in: Haun Saussy (ed.), *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization*, John Hopkins University Press, 2006.

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fear of blameability reigns supreme, as if a sacrilege were being committed. It is because of this that revisions do not abound."[11]

3.3. The logjams of revisionism

This last sentence of Monica Lovinescu's, dating from 1994, contains a great truth, even though it is uttered via two false assumptions: revisionist efforts were, indeed, "abundant", becoming a critical obsession, whose reverberations extend until today, and the "cause" of their failure cannot be explained solely through the counteroffensive they allegedly triggered. Indeed, it has become clear that East-ethical revisionism missed revisiting post-war literature, even though – as I have tried to demonstrate – at the theoretical or conceptual level, Monica Lovinescu configures the first consistent explanation, with sufficient correspondences, in the Western cultural space, with the (extra)aesthetic branchings on which the literary canon is founded. The reasons why these principles of literary history and criticism did not gain ground in the first post-communist decade have nothing to do with their potential conceptual precariousness, or with the opposition those ideas encountered from the so-called "conservative" defenders of aesthetic autonomy. On the contrary, the causes underlying the failure of East-ethical revisions could be understood through an approach that I would call *imagological*. From the outset, what interfered with the process and impact of revisions was the mythologisation of Monica Lovinescu's activity, which the exegete herself condoned, as did various personalities of the Romanian intellectual milieus (including due to political reasons).

3.3.1 Self-mythification

A simple reading of *Unde scurte* (*Shortwaves*) (six volumes published between 1990 and 1996), designed to inventory her journalistic/radio activity during her exile, of the memoirs entitled *La apa Vavilonului* (*By the Waters of Babylon*), written in 1998, with the intent to retrieve the period from before 1980, when *Jurnalul* (*Journal*) was begun, reveals the psychological and biographical motivations of Lovinescu's

[11] The talk between Dumitru Chioaru-Monica Lovinescu-Virgil Ierunca, dated "October 1994," transcribed under the title "Revizuirile sunt necesare, mai ales în perioada aceasta de tranziție înghețată," in: *România literară,* no. 9-10, 15-21 March 1995, p. 12.

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revisionist approach. Thus, the leitmotiv of these volumes remains the image of the mother, reiterated for multiple reasons – reading an article about the murders committed in the communist prisons, receiving a call from a "pal" of hers during the period of detention, the loss of a loved one, and even for no reason at all. These are the sequences that relativize, always reconfirming, at the same time, the sacrifices entailed by the condition of exile and the legitimacy of critical activity.

A symptomatic entry is that of 25 April 1984, the day in which they were informed of the death of Virgil Ierunca's mother in the most atrocious manner (by having a postal order stating that the addressee was "deceased" returned to them). This is probably the point of maximum tension in the journal. Especially after 1990, what is demonstrated is a fundamental incompatibility between the memory of the maternal figure and the need for (re)ordering personal or communal memory: "I have committed the necessary mistake of searching, reopening dossiers and, especially, reading from her last letters. And I could see what I had actually known all along: no wound has healed. After this I am no longer good for anything. (Friday, 6 April 1990)," "I reopened mother's *Dossier* [...] I wasn't up to anything else all night. It hasn't healed. (Friday, 27 December 1991)," "I came across a chronicle I's written about mother's arrest [...] and got stuck for a week, unable to write a single note. (Thursday, 17 December 1992)," "For as long as I live, her grave will be inside me (Tuesday, 1 June 1993)."[12]

This constantly relived trauma may explain a note of the kind written on 14 April 1990, just two days before returning from her almost half-a-century-long exile: "But in fact, it is not for the writers that I'm coming back to Romania, after 40 years. I have been through life waiting for this moment. Now that it's knocking on the door, I wonder if I was right, if bracketing my existence has served any purpose. Right now, when the "purpose" seems clear to the others. The blame, above all, is mine. I am not– and I never will be – able to cope with mother's arrest and death in prison. It is not from the ethical shallowness of Romanian writers that my *la nausée* stems from, but from here."[13] Only thus, through a sense of martyrdom converted into self-mythification, could one understand the

[12] Monica Lovinescu, *Jurnal 1990-1993*, ed. cit., pp. 91, 204, 300, 351.
[13] *Ibidem*, p. 94.

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inconsistencies, excesses, and confusions that punctuate many of Monica Lovinescu's public statements. In these situations, the difference between the "canonicity" and "canonization" is obliterated, as her revisionist efforts are guided by rhetorical impulsiveness rather than by analytical rationality. Not only are "cases" settled by the very critics of the 1960s-70s artificially reopened,[14] but constant, rough detraction awaits those writers (Valeriu Cristea, Augustin Buzura, Eugen Simion, Marin Sorescu and Fănuş Neagu) who allegedly harbour pro-Iliescu (hence, neo-communist) sympathies, asserting the necessity of defending the autonomy of the aesthetic.[15] All their arguments are usually caricatured. Her opposition to the East-ethical revisions incites her recourse to labelling, such as "localism," "nationalism," "opportunism," "critical inertia," "methodological retardation," and causes her downright revulsion.

Predictably, any debate is cancelled, nay, worse, Monica Lovinescu's theoretical project is undermined, making room for sterile polemics and idiosyncratic manifestation. Suggestive, in this regard, is the stand the editor of "Free Europe" Radio takes in relation to the moral reconsideration of Mircea Eliade. Norman Manea's essay "Felix culpa," published in *The New Republic* (in which the great scholar's Nazi affiliations are castigated, but in which his literary and philosophical work is, at no time, misinterpreted from an ethical vantage) occasions a series of attacks launched by Lovinescu the exegete – extending across several years

[14] See Andrei Terian, "Revizuiri și compensații," in: *Steaua*, no. 3 (749), year LXII, March 2011 p. 31: "the paradox is that the most important 'East-ethical' revisions in the post-December 1989 period remain those that were operated before 1989. Eugen Barbu was already finished as a novelist in 1990, and his exclusion from the Union was just a cherry on top the cake of 'revisions'; moreover, the ambiguities, the political slippages and the ethical relativism in the prose of writers like D.R. Popescu or C. Țoiu had already been sanctioned by the literary reviewers of the communist period. Thus, after 1989, not much had been left to 'review.' There was still explaining and detailing to be done, since one of the tactics frequently adopted by the literary critics of the communist period had been to conceal their ideological and moral reserves behind 'stylistic' reproaches (or, sometimes, behind a demonstrative silence)."

[15] Passim. Monica Lovinescu, "Un chinez: Valeriu Cristea," in *Convorbiri literare*, no. 41, December 1990; Magd Cârneci's interview with Monica Lovinescu and Virgil Ierunca, entitled "Scriitorul trebuie să vegheze la mersul lucrurilor în cetate," in: *22*, no. 33, 21 August 1992.

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(as Claudiu Turcuş germanely analyses the case in *Estetica lui Norman Manea*[16]). These attacks are expressed through syntagms intended, as it were, to violate the very East-ethical revisions initiated by Monica Lovinescu: the author of *The Black Envelope* is accused of promoting "confusions" that impart a "bizarre aspect" to literary life, that the entire article is an "attack against Eliade" (because "a dark stain" is spilled on his entire activity), that it evinces "bad faith" or "just blindness to the Western realities" because it questions the writer's silence about the "sin of youth," even though he should know that "in the West, confessing that you were a communist or a Stalinist brings no prejudice, on the contrary, it is rather highly regarded; by contrast, adhering to some form or other of fascism, however transient, represents an indelible stain, capable of putting an end to any intellectual career."[17] What may be noticed here is not only the double standard, but the plea, in effect, for polarized revisions of the literary tradition. "The trial of communism" should monopolize the autochthonous cultural scene, regardless of the excesses and injustices involved, perceived as necessary compromises for exorcising the demons of the past and for entry into normality.

3.3.2 Mythification

Normally, this "bellicose" logic, rhetorical impulsiveness and the blatant sequences of self-contradiction should have been allayed and addressed by the other supporters of East-ethical revisionism. However, in symbiosis with the exegete's self-mythifications, there appeared a second blockage: the cult for Monica Lovinescu. Admiration and gratitude for the capital role she had assumed by being the "voice of Radio *Free Europe*" during the years of communism (a benchmark for all the Romanian exiles, as well as for those who had the opportunity to visit Paris) were derailed, in time, into a mythology that no longer allowed the rational perception of her ideas of literary criticism, theory and history. Gheorghe Grigurcu called her "a Cassandra of literary criticism"[18], hence, an unheard and misunderstood

[16] Passim Claudiu Turcuș, *Estetica lui Norman Manea*, București: Editura „Cartea Românească", 2012, pp. 209-214.
[17] Monica Lovinescu, "Câteva confuzii," in. *22*, no. 10, 19 March 1992, p. 13.
[18] Gheorghe Grigurcu, "O Cassandră a criticii: Monica Lovinescu," in. *Viața românească*, no. 5, May 1992, apud *Cronologia...*, vol. III, ed. cit., p. 284.

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voice of the truth. Other qualifiers commonly encountered in newspapers during the immediate aftermath of the 1989 Revolution included the reference to her "exemplary consciousness, which keeps hope alive." Gabriel Liiceanu added later that "History had turned us into cripples of self-expression, and they [the radio reviews] returned to us the gift of words."[19] Dan C. Mihăilescu also wrote quasi-dithyrambic notes, referring to the house of the Lovinescu-Ierunca spouses as "a Mecca of Romanian exile."[20]

In conclusion, Monica Lovinescu's "East-ethical" revisions – fundamental for the Romanian debate on the literary canon – are invoked, quoted, but not re-read and, in any case, not "revised," so today they seem doomed to an ever increasing ideological deployment, correlated with an ever decreasing critical applicability, as Bianca Burța-Cernat notes in a comment on Monica Lovinescu's *Jurnalul inedit. 2001-2002 (An Unusual Journal. 2001-2002),* published in 2014: "Giving her all due consideration as a critic that cannot be overlooked except by ignorance or ill-intention, it would be wise to identify Monica Lovinescu as a voice and not as the *Voice*, with *a* vision and not with the Vision, as a critical/ethical/civic attitude and not as the supreme model of critical/ethical/civic attitude in a particular historical context, as a conscience (with its bright sides and with its equally natural penumbras) and not as the Conscience – or, in Liiceanu's ecstatic terms, as the 'good conscience of the Romanian nation." In short: as a human and as a critic, not as the Human, not as the Critic, not the myth, not the statue, as Monica Lovinescu's image threatens to emerge after 1990, against some *bon ton* laments in certain literary circles."[21]

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[19] Gabriel Liiceanu, *Declarație de iubire*, București: Editura „Humanitas", 2001, p. 89.
[20] Dan C. Mihăilescu, *Literatura română în postceauşism*, vol. I: *Memorialistica sau trecutul ca re-umanizare*, Iaşi: „Polirom", 2004, p. 238.
[21] Bianca Burța-Cernat, "Un epilog diaristic și prologul unei reevaluări critice (I)," in: *Observator cultural*, no. 758, 6 February 2015, p. 12.

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