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EUGEN SIMION - (LITERARY) CRITIC – A FORM OF CHARACTER

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Abstract:
The article presents the life and activity of one of the greatest contemporary Romanian literary critics. President of the Romanian Academy, member of the French Academy of Arts, Eugen Simion approached the work of classical and contemporary Romanian writers as well as that of international writers such as E. Ionescu, E. Cioran, M. Eliade, P. Popescu.
Key-words:
E. Simion, literary criticism, literary history.

Rezumat:
Articolul prezintă viaţa şi activitatea unuia dintre cei mai mari critici ;i istorici literari contemporani. Fost vicepreşedinte şi preşedinte al Academiei Române, membru al Academiei de Arte Franceze, Eugen Simion a abordat atât opera unor scriitori români mai vechi sau mai noi, cât şi a unora de circulaţie internaţională (E. Ionescu, E. Cioran, M. Eliade, P. Popescu).
Cuvinte-cheie: E. Simion, critică literară, istorie literară.

On the 25th of May this year, the academician Eugen Simion celebrates his 80th anniversary, an age as beautiful and impressive as his accomplishments.

That is why I considered it would be more appropriate to pay homage to Eugen Simion, the man and scholar, by re-reading his books, because the ideas comprised in them are a true invitation to dialogue for those who choose to take this action. I am following this type of spiritual communication, and among the meaningful consequences of going through his studies I will pause at the teacher's redefining of the critic act and, through it, to the exigencies that the literary critic serves in his activity.

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To begin with, I would dare to note that few researchers of Romanian literature have defined with such insistence the theory of the critic's work, perceiving its evolution, instruments and purpose in focusing on the phenomenon of creation. In these books, one will find numerous suggestions which, through the frequent comebacks and nuances, take the shape of a profession of faith. This is the one that I would like to pause over, configuring it the best way I can, after reading his books.

In Professor Eugen Simion's point of view, "*the mission (and, thus, the justification for the literary critic) is to prove, among others, the character of uniqueness of the literary masterpiece". The literary critic faces this paradox (artistic uniqueness is analysed with instruments that tend to bear the name of the universally-valid), by using the instruments of science, because today's literary critic cannot be accomplished outside of science. Although, as G. Călinescu used to say, "the investigation environment of the literary critic is the ineffable*", the critic must have a set of principles and master means of analysis which would guard him from the danger of impressionist evasion. Without minimizing his profession, Eugen Simionescu accepts the presence of the subjective element in the literary critic, as the ineffable factors (taste, intuition, expressivity) "*preside a* ***science*** *that does not exist outside language*". That is why the professor considers the critical exercise to be a form of creation that includes alliances with other disciplines and, more often than not, takes advantage of the means and discoveries of exact sciences. This does not mean that a critic, a connoisseur of the essential works and new means of analysis is beholden to use them all. The reality that today we cannot disregard psychoanalysis, semiotics, enlisting themes or literary sociology does not justify clogging the critic into methodology, nor limiting it to speculations around the theory. Their purpose is to aid the critic to appropriately read a text and discover its functioning method.

To the aforementioned ideas I will add the nuances from the essay "Patru imagini ale criticii" (Four images of criticism) where Professor Eugen Simion makes a brief overview of the types of criticism that, at the time, were exclusively confronting each other. The analysis does not exclude them, but explains them by finding both their legitimacy and their weaknesses, establishing their evolution and borderlines, and, mainly, their effort towards a more perfectible knowledge of the horizons of literary work.

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From the impressionist critic, Professor Eugen Simion assumes the feeling that, filtering everything through the water of joy, this grants it autonomous statute and creative fantasy. He agrees with the positivist critics, those erudite nerds "determined to study until the four-leafed clover until the tenth rung". In these Darwinists of the letters, he sees the authors of histories of literature intended as works of science, whose supreme aim is the great summary. He does not fully agree with the *new criticism*, which brings to the foreground "*the image of the critic as a theoretician of literature and of the theoretician as a man of method (guelf)*", due to the fact that he disposes of the traditional gifts of the critic without regret. For them, the work only exists as a function, not as an aesthetic object, and Eugen Simion's regret (alongside with Jean-Pierre Richard) is that the work as a unique, irreducible universe risks disintegrating in this operation. For the postmodern critic ("*a hermeneutic who can rise and watch the work from above"), who entered the scene as a* ***ghibelline*** *(man of pleasures) and wants to be a critic of the total, not the fragment, Eugen Simion suggests an image that is less in accordance with the ones already used: that of the Nichita-like angel who flies over the city with a book in his hand. And he adds: "But, be weary, the book is open and, in the skies, the angel is reading*…"

Indispensable to the critical spirit, in the way of opening towards the great categories, "*philosophy is a free meditation aiding to the discovery of the metaphysics of the work*". Happily limiting the adventure in the field of approximations, philosophy enlightens our knowledge and makes a reliable guide of life and creations in the "forest" of the unknown.

The critic must allow himself to be attracted by the great subjects, something that can be clearly seen in the work and activity of Eugen Simion. His study subjects are not small, although not even small things should be left at the will of those who have their intellectual scope limited to narrowing intellectual subjects. The critic considers himself challenged by great subjects and believes in his destiny as a hermeneutic of the latent ideas in literary creation. The extent of these works requires equal competence and, as a consequence, all the great projects followed by Eugen Simion have become reference studies, regardless of whether they refer to the amplitude of the spirit of Eliade, to that of Eugen Ionescu or Marin Preda, or to the fiction of the intimate diary or the beginnings of our poetry.

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The polyphonic discourse of today's critic has regrettably expropriated the direction guidance from the cultural field, which has almost ceased its significance. However, this sort of orientations are found in the professor's activity, first as a thorough selection of the subjects, second, through their development into broad critical summaries, and, third, by establishing them in the pages of books, whose life is certainly longer than published literary works. Written in the capital of the great European literary debates, and polemically evaluating the disputes of the moment, valid even now (a few years ago it was translated in the USA and met with high acclaim), *The Return of the Author* must be considered the professor's response to the offensive and the excesses of the structuralist and textualist methods of the eight decade of the last century. At the same time, it is also a book that grants literary direction, through obstinately defending the "rights" of the author. Along with the four volumes in the series "*Romanian Writers of Today*", *The Return of the Author* has, as they say, the significance of a vector in our literary criticism. Although the literary critic does not have an effigy or a protecting deity, Eugen Simion establishes, among the rising models of the mythology in the field, Mercutio rather than the more frequently evoked Caliban. From Shakespeare's characters, it is not Caliban, but Mercutio, who seems to better express the true drama of the critic: "*A lot can be learned from this character's tragedy and, in the first place, one existential thing: the expression of a death as sublime as all for naught. I like to believe that Mercutio can also be a symbol of the critic: the symbol of his sacrifice in the world of literary vanities, big or small, humble or conceited, always restless and greedy. If we are to accept, like Lovinescu did, the idea that any critic requires a sacrifice, the power to give up, the noblesse of losing, then the critic is, like Mercutio, the victim of a conflict that does not concern him*".

Eugen Lovinescu, whom Eugen Simion considers to be "*the true architect of our literature in its modern phase*", has been mentioned in the previous quote. As one should know, the two of them shared great appreciation of each other. The recovery of the great interwar critic for the generations of today was done in *E. Lovinescu, the Cured Sceptic*, a book in

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which the professor saved all his great contributions from being ignored. Lovinescu gave our literature the concepts of synchronism and modernism, thus setting directions and selecting the perennial literary values. Furthermore, "his page is a superb prose of ideas that we also read for its beauty". These truths, that have become a common good of our literary history, also find their reflection in the one who established them. Professor Eugen Simion has repeatedly proven that, despite the modest activity of the "Sburătorul" cenacle and magazine, Lovinescu's criticism had a great impact in the era, due to his bright spirit and fizzy talent, which accompanied his incontestably zestful discourse. Lovinescu was the first to note that, in fact, criticism is a contest of ideas, stimulating thinking into acting accordingly.

However, what one must remember here is not Lovinescianism as a phenomenon comprised in the literary chronology, but the Lovinescian lesson that Eugen Simion carries further, not only as an interpreter of his illustrious predecessor but also, as I find worth mentioning, as a mentor of contemporary literature.

Lovinescu's lesson (continuing Maiorescu's principles) entitles Eugen Simion to evoke the *talent* in the analytical performance and to consider that, in turn, the critic must also be an artist. Few people accept this truth regarding the literates, yet all agree that it is only through it that the work as a source of inspiration and object of analysis reshapes itself, becoming another form of literature in which the spirit manifests itself, polemically or cordially, at the deeper level of the critical demonstration.

I could end this short article appraising the way in which Eugen Simion understands and practices literary criticism with the image of the angel in the work of his friend and high-school colleague, Nichita Stanescu. This would be especially appropriate insofar as the critic has dedicated numerous pages of enlightened understanding to the poet that started the third great revolution of the Romanian artistic language, thus watching over his posterity, which has sometimes been unjustly challenged.

I will not end before evoking the advice addressed by Professor Eugen Simion to the young practitioners of literary interpretation. Among

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these teachings, I will pause over the request of not mixing literature with politics (which does not mean that literature and politics are not accepted as distinct ways of life, as some people have erroneously understood), but mostly to the encouragement he addressed to the young – that of taking, in the name of their future profession, a bow of faith and sacrifice: "*Literary criticism implies a long sacrifice. Accept that you must organize your lives, sacrifice your vacations, socialization, sometimes even your friendships. Your reading must be slow and, most of all, thoughtful*".

Signalling these ideas excerpted from Professor Eugen Simion's books, which I consider to synthesize a profession of faith, I can see more clearly why the literary critic, in his role as a writer, cannot live outside the "ambiguities" generated by art. His voices and, as a consequence, his writings, permanently assume the object of knowledge and the irreversible will of understanding others. Through all these, *the finger of light* will point at the way to the truth. Literary criticism is a thoughtful reading which manifests itself as an act of creation and comprehension.

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