



Polishing vs Policing the Mores: A Speculative Approach to Public Space and Literary Criticism in Post-Stalinist Societies¹

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Abstract. The paper elaborates on a social and psychological understanding of space, by adopting the view that the generation of social space is a mechanism inherent and essential to developing a sense of personal freedom. It also posits that the rules, attitudes, and postures of conviviality could be construed as generating the experience of “space,” both social and public. The necessary character of the connection between the manners (including the training in the ways of the acumen) which define the classical ideal of “politeness” and the projection (seminal to the most common notion of “civilization”) of protective virtual spaces is tested on a fringe case: the emergence, through the agency of literary criticism, of enclaves of polite debate within the post-Stalinist East-European societies.

Keywords: politeness, conversation, face, distance, publicity

1. Literary Criticism, Polite Conversation and the Public Space

The social strategy the present paper postulates as the most relevant for cohesively organizing and managing social distances is *politeness*. In post-Stalinist East European regimes, literary criticism offered the predilect means of

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configuring/codifying and exercising civility through discourses and conversational habits that induced and modulated social distances.

The idea of interpreting persuasion as the control over the distance between the emitent and the receiver of a discourse is best expressed in the classical study of Wayne C. Booth *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961). According to the Chicago theoretician *distance* is an essential and strategic element of literary communication. In Booth's study of the novel, it accounts for the novelist's control over the different degrees of sympathy and trust that the reader confers to the characters of the novel. In a somehow analogical manner post-Stalinist literary criticism, as the first and one of the very few innovative/personalized forms of public discourse tolerated by the Communist censorship, retrieved and continuously refashioned codes of *ancien régime* (i.e., pre-Communist) politeness that could be understood as rhetorical strategies of thematizing and controlling social distances, understood, in Booth's psychological manner, as degrees of empathy/sympathy (but also consistent with the "proxemics" approach advanced in the social sciences by Edward Hall – 1966/1990).

The network of social politeness is normally equated with the most reasonable and refined expression of common sense, which, according to a famous anthropological definition provided by Clifford Geertz (1983) is a "cultural system." But in a situation where two or more such cultural systems interfere and tacitly compete, common sense becomes blurred by ambiguity and politeness could be redefined as an art of prudence that mediates between different social codes and mores.

In the specific case of literary criticism under state Socialism, the strategy of politeness was not oriented towards reducing social ambiguity, but, on the contrary, towards amplifying it. Social distances were not to be well defined and clear-cut, as traditional *status*es (Weber 1948, 180-94). Clarity was a situation to be avoided, because any "clarification," that is to say, any normative decision that would have replaced spontaneous negotiation, could only bring new deprivations of the exercise of the civic rights – no matter whether felt as natural or as social constructions (Kis 1989). Therefore, the interest of the polite society was to preserve the indeterminacy of social semiotics, while developing the skills and habits to effectively cope with it and instrumentalize it to its advantage.

In order to better understand the connection between the strategies of polite conversation, face preserving, social distancing, and the creation of social/public space, we have to understand that literary criticism (LC) was simultaneously connected to four different playgrounds. The qualities of the generated social space, a space that should be imagined as a texture and a field of forces, varied with the nature of the relationship that called for distancing/differentiation and face-saving strategies. These relationships can be organized in four major categories, and in what follows I will analyze them one by one: a) the relationship between LC and the political power (or the ideological "superstructure" of the

Communist state); b) the relationship between LC and the public; c) the relationship between LC and the person/institution/social function/public myth of the Author; and d) relationships internal to the LC community itself.

2. LC facing the Tyrant/Magistrate

As announced in the above subtitle, I will use two alternative notions for designating the political-ideological authority of the Communist state. Both concepts hint at the speculative reconstruction of the LC perspective on the agents that exercised control over culture and society. On the one hand, I propose the notion of Tyrant, derived from the classical Greek political philosophy and widely used in Western European early modernity for unconstitutional and illegitimate rulers and governments. When I employ this notion, I refer to the hidden nucleus of the social imagination of the counter-elites of the Communist state. On the other hand, I will use the notion of “Magistrate,” equally derived from early modern political philosophy (e.g., from John Locke’s famous *Letters Concerning Toleration* 1689–1692, Vernon 2010, 3–46), which allows for a rather neutral attitude towards an abstract or theoretical instance of government that is not seen as essentially irrational, and could be construed as a civilized partner of discussion/conversation/negotiation. The term Magistrate will therefore address the strategy of LC of pretending to take the rationalist and progressive claims of the Communist political authorities at face value.

Returning to my main concern and topic I will posit that the generation of social and public space, when considered in the framework of the relationship between LC and the detainers of the political power, was due to a strategy of taming the crude Romanticism inherent in the totalitarian drive of the Communist ideology. This formulation being an allusion to Virgil Nemoianu’s (1984) vision of the “taming of Romanticism” by the bourgeois polite society of the second half of the nineteenth century – a theory in which the Romanian literary comparatist might have nostalgically evoked, from his American exile, the very strategy applied (or only fancied) by LC in Communist Eastern Europe in its intercourse with the softer post-Stalinist version of Communist political tyranny.

Generating social space, in this particular instance, meant instituting a symbolic distance, an imaginative buffer zone between society and the Tyrant. This strategy could be followed in its finest articulation if one were to undergo a monographic study of the notion of “power” in the LC discourse of the post-Stalinist epoch. Power being a metaphor meant to mediate or to cunningly glide between the “Tyrant” and the “Magistrate” mental hypostatizations of the political authority. In analyzing fiction, LC could speak in general, ahistorical terms, and in a cast of mind alluding to the Greek-Latin or to seventeenth-century classical moralists, of the temptations and eventual damages brought about by the exercise

of power for Power's sake. The symbolic conglomerate of Power was central in articulating a *public* accusation, and by so doing, in signalling a *distance* (and creating a difference, a mental *space*) between the Communist party and the society it pretended to fully represent and incorporate. But this accusation should be euphuistic, volatile in nature, not pointing the finger toward the one-party system or cadre.

This prudent avoidance, not at all unrelated with the diplomacy of vagueness of the classical moralists themselves, could equally be construed as a strategy described by Brown and Levinson (1987) as "negative politeness," i.e., creating the opportunity for Power to, for instance, reconsider its attitude towards the public freedom of expression, while keeping its "face" (Goffman 1967). Brought a step further, this strategy implies a complete omission of the reference to the all-pervasive political-ideological authority. The omission of *explicit* references to the ideological framework could be construed as to equate with the implicit statement that in a socialist state dialectical and historical materialism had become one with the general culture, that it "naturally" infused the social atmospherics. On the other hand, by "ignoring" the ideological monitoring LC acted as if the graciousness of its discourse had been completely equivalent with free speech, and as if the freedom of public conversation had been taken for granted in a "mature" socialist society. Although LC indirectly "flattered" the Tyrant, implicitly treating it as a reasonable instance that would in all evidence never make use of its brutal force in order to impose on its subjects. This form of politeness opened the possibility for the Tyrant self-styling into a reasonable Magistrate.

Actually, social space was gained through the essential ambiguity of the LC discourse, in its perpetual vacillation between: a) deferring the party, in an essentially deferent manner (where deference was a manner of reshaping the Stalinist compulsory display of submission into a manifestation of discrete civil allegiance) the status of an umpire of the cultural scene; and b) tacitly taking over this office of cultural umpire and exercising so as to increase the autonomy of the cultural public space. The crux of this space-creating strategy lied in intertwining LC's interest in gaining a social face with the Communist government interest in keeping its face. We should recall that in 1975, at the peak of the Détente, the heads of the Communist states signed the Helsinki Accords, as an expression of their aspiration to be recognized as an integral part of the civilized world (Sakwa 1999, 142-149).

At this point of our discussion, we should ponder on the reasons that made LC, rather than literature as such, into the privileged vehicle of the public spirit in the post-Stalinist Communist societies. My argument on this matter rests on matters of principle, not on historical contingencies. By its very nature, the condition of literature as a public discourse is open to controversy. The literary work as such is "dumb" (Frye 1957), and this natural status was consolidated under

the specific circumstances of Communist dictatorships. Having to confront the pressures of a huge mechanism of ideological censorship, both the authors and the critics were interested in emphasizing the above-mentioned paradox of expressivity as non-expression, and of the “speechless speak” of literature. The “muteness” of literature was construed as a paragon of implicitness, as a strategy of *preserving* rather than instrumentalizing the expressive potentiality of the natural language. It was, therefore, the lot of LC to provide for what we could call a *manifest* social discourse. Or, in other words, to test, approximate, and gradually enlarge the confines of what could be publicly expressed in a Communist society. This meant continuously generating, even if at a microscopic level, the essentially mental space of a civic society.

It is also important to note that the generation of public space through the taming of the Tyrant attempted by LC in the post-Stalinist societies has run a course quite opposite to one of the central ideological trends of the Western European post WW II democratic radicalism. The LC of Western Europe was profoundly impregnated with theory, superbly articulated in the interbellum epoch by Walter Benjamin (1939/1968), that the “charisma” of the work of art was part and parcel of the structure of an authoritarian, hierarchic society. In post-Stalinist Eastern Europe the religion of art (the genuine or simulated belief in the “mysterious” origin and nature of, say, the literary inspiration) was consistent with the advocacy for democratic and liberal values.

The apparent paradox of this strategy was that the political pressure towards the display of an adulatory social behavior (which was the main form of expressing social cohesion from the point of view of the Communist political class) was temporarily suspended, or neutralized, in a “homeopathic” manner, by a rival form of adulatory behavior, this time oriented towards the essential incomprehensibility not of the artifacts as such, but of the mental processes that make them possible. LC was turning its attention from the literary works as such, from what they actually said, toward implicitly questioning the “wherefrom” of the arts. And working to make the “origin” even more “mysterious” by the very act of questioning. In so doing, LC deluded the vigilance of the Tyrant, while allowing for a space of quasi-conspiratorial encounters between the “honest,” “unregimented” author and a public whose state of mind was actually the one of a nascent political constituency. Which is to say that, in its strategy of dealing with the Magistrate, LC attempted to create a *quasi-political space*, while in its strategy of containing the Tyrant it attempted to generate a *political quasi-space*.

3. LC facing the Public

In analyzing this axis of the social space generation in the post-Stalinist societies of Eastern Europe, we should begin by stressing an important ambiguity.

Under the circumstances of a Communist state, even the most culturally liberal that could be imagined (e.g., the Yugoslav federation), the status of LC – which granted it a limited freedom of expression (or, more precisely, a rhetorical maneuvering space) – oscillated between the condition of a *privilege* and the condition of a *right*. This should come as no surprise since ambiguity infused the post-Stalinist system in most distinctive forms, at almost all imaginable levels and walks of social life. But for the present context it is essential to intimate to what extent the “objective” ambiguity of the LC social status was transferred into a privilege vs. right moral dilemma. It is essential because the possible manners of assuming/instrumentalizing its ambiguity of status directly shaped LC’s relationships with its reading public.

Let us begin by exploring the nature of the “privilege.” This consisted in the very access to publicity, to mass media of any kind. This access was granted and strictly controlled by the Communist bureaucracy. Being allowed to “plug in” to the network of public expression meant to be ascribed a position in a matrix of influential social positions. That is to say, a place, no matter how modest, in the *Nomenklatura* (Voslensky 1984), or, if we focus on the cultural domain, in the *Privilegentsia*, this being a concept devised by Ioana Macrea Toma (2009) for describing the complex condition of a privileged *intelligentsia*.

By participating in a system of privileges, the “brilliance” of LC was apparently bound to legitimize and reinforce the political status quo. A post-Stalinist attenuation of this condition was the change from ascribing LC a precise place in the bureaucratic hierarchy of party propaganda, to customizing the status of LC as part of a wider system of corporative privileges. This evolution was paralleled by a transformation in the nature of the freedoms granted to LC (but in no way an irreversible one; we should rather speak of a buffer zone of rhetorical ambiguity allowing for occasional transgressions). At the starting point of the post-Stalinist process, LC was granted only a freedom of expression as distinct from the control over the ultimate meanings of its message (Haraszti 1987). The ideological monopoly of the Communist party had to be confirmed and acknowledged, even if the logical-rhetorical manner of doing this could be unconventional or “innovative.” But, at the peak of the post-Stalinist liberalization, the freedom of critical expression was tacitly accepted as a means to itself, and even intellectual autonomy could be granted as long as it referred to topics that could be presented as “professional,” as having to do “exclusively” with the literary expertise.

But besides all these nuances, as long as the status of LC was conceived as a privilege bestowed from above, its intellectual liberties could be rightly seen as part of a showcase policy. What they implied was the simulation of an intellectual state of “normalcy” through some sort of Communist variety of the talk show. Which, actually, was meant to be only a show of talk. Let to itself, the as-good-as-free exercise of the intellectual expressivity could only institute an arrogant distantiation from a public who was supposed to admire the plays of principled

argument without being allowed to join in. The limits of the public space were meant to be invisible but firm. Laymen were meant to construe the participation to the intellectual polite society as an exceptional if not providential privilege.

The resulting LC strategy of controlling social distances in the relationship with the Public implied the development of an esoteric, specialized language, justified by the participation of LC to a superior understanding of things. The critic paraded as a judge, a Magistrate to itself, who set the intellectual trends and established the value standards.

But on the other hand, the social identity or the “face” of liberal LC was configured by the tacit rejection of the above-mentioned role. LC did not fully and passively accept to act *as if* expressing and confronting opinions in a “normal” democratic society. The critic did not agree to simply simulate the condition of being a representative of the public (or of the civil society), but attempted to give this tolerated form of polite conversation as much ethical content as possible.

Its ambiguous social position allowed post-Stalinist LC to glide between the opportunity that brought it inside the process that was transforming Communism into a society of hierarchical and corporative privileges, and its humanistic ethos which called for participation in the diffuse egalitarian solidarity generated as a spontaneous response to the equidistance that the Tyrant instituted in its relationship to society. The discourse of LC was one of the few means that made possible the fantasy of distancing *from* the Tyrant, of keeping the Tyrant at bay through a tacit solidarity in subversion, through a sense of commonality and cooperation.

From this perspective, LC did not see itself as simply offering a representation for the public, with the consequence of generating or giving course to a process of arrogant vertical social distancing. This “aestheticization of the political” (political meaning here the inherent organizing/governing virtues of the debate) was due to create a contemplative, admiring distance, and was matched by LC’s aspiration of representing the public. This is an attitude which, following the pattern of Walter Benjamin’s dialectics (1930/1968), implies the “politicization of the aesthetic” and the use of politeness or civility in an open, inviting, inclusive manner.

Post-Stalinist LC explored the possibility of deriving its legitimacy from the public, not from the party. On the one hand, the public was treated as a ubiquitous partner, as a witness and a *raisonneur*. Actually, the “reader” was a code name for the ideal type of the conversational polite society. On the other hand, the “public” became a concept and a myth widely evoked in the critic’s negotiations with the political power. “Public opinion” and “public taste” were construed as real and influential social forces, as forms of latent power that *in extremis* could be opposed to the manifest regulatory power. The stalemate between these forces allowed for the mental experiment of the public space.

In its strategy of *rapprochement* with respect to the “general public,” LC freely oscillated between two strategies of implicitness. On the one hand, it practiced a “covert” implicitness, one creating a secret understanding, a tissue of side- and under-meanings between the critic and the public. A network of social communication from which the Tyrant was theoretically excluded (although the self-aware and consensual use of implicitness implied its presence, its threatening watch over all the intellectual transactions of the public space). On the other hand, LC practiced a strategy of “overt” implicitness, tackling some highly sensitive political subjects with an air of spontaneity and acting as if it went without saying that the Communist Magistrate, as a reasonable umpire of political correctness, was totally willing to grant and encourage the free expression of thought.

It should be noted that the most powerful civilizing effect of the process of social distancing is that, by concentrating on their equals, by offering them the highest display of public respect, by subtly distancing themselves from each other, the subjects learn to ignore the sovereign power, or, more accurately, they tend to render their submission to this power purely nominal. So that the public space is not simply space under political circumstances, but it implies a qualitatively new *kind* of space, based on social differentiations that do not impeach, but encourage intersubjectivity (Berger and Luckmann 1966, Hernadi 1995, 28-34). The public space is a dynamic system of distances that create the possibility of a generalized exchange, not only of goods and ideas, but also of horizontal symbolic investitures. By mutually granting themselves social respect, the citizens jointly gain access to a higher notion of self-respect and personal dignity.

With its polite conversation on matters of taste LC paved the way for and in many instances pre-configured the idea of the “power of the powerless” (Havel et al., 1990). And it offered a ground for the intellectual training of a civil society that, later on, will have to negotiate the transition to democracy with the representatives of the Communist party. In many Eastern European countries the exercise of polite conversation with the field of social forces and the social space it generated around itself prepared society for a non-violent transition to democracy.

4. LC facing the Author

Let us inquire now into the ways of social distancing focusing on the relationship between the Critic and the Author as two roles/prototypes fashioned by the post-Stalinist social imagination. During the reign of terror that, for all the Socialist regimes, characterized the phases of gaining and consolidating power, the instance of the Author, perceived as a remain of the bourgeois “fetish” of individual autonomy, was one of the favored targets of the “deconstruction” undertaken by the party ideologists. Actually, the interpreters of the ideological orthodoxy for the field of the arts and letters managed to fully abrogate the

authority of the Author. This is a situation curiously reminding of imperial Rome, where authorship was not deferred to the artist, but to the sponsor, to the person or institution that ordered and financed a certain work of public art (Arendt 1961). In the ideologically radical phase of the instauration of Communism, as a direct consequence of the symbolic and in many ways also juridical suppression of the sphere of privacy, art became public in its entirety.

This went hand in hand with the suppression of the respectful/polite distance between the Critic and the Author. Ideological critics thereby asserted that the creative energy and the skills of the real life authors should be seen as rightfully belonging to the Socialist “commune,” which in fact meant that they were considered the property of the Socialist State. The critic was therefore entitled to treat the author as a social asset, as a cultural G. I.

The post-Stalinist age brought a gradual relaxation, allowing for the reinvention of the Critic-Author relationship. This would not be construed anymore as an instance of the social distribution of work patterned on the metaphor of the industrial production chain (an allegory, actually, in which the writer played the part of the actual manual worker and the critic the one of the middle management). The relationship Author-Critic became again, at a public level, a manifestly personal and civil interaction. The critic asserts and even celebrates the identity of the author as a distinct personality. The critical rhetoric, which, as my argument runs, is the epitome of social politeness under state Socialism, was meant to make visible and consolidate the author’s *face* (Goffman 1967), his *persona* (Harris Perlman 1986), with the remarkable side effect of generating social space, i.e., the humanizing kind of space, defined not by its extension but by its discrete structure, its texture (or tissue) of human interaction.

This strategy implies the calibration of suggestive/expressive social distances because respect can be manifested and thematized only by a rhetoric of courteous social distantiation. Nevertheless, LC’s display of a multifaceted and spectacular respect for the personality of the Author was not spared a certain ethical tension: should the right of being officially sanctioned as a social *persona* be bestowed only upon “creative” personalities, or, even more precisely, over exceptional creators? But it should be understood that the ambiguity contained in this omnipresent even if unasked question was not of a fatal, but in many instances, of a strategic kind. LC intentionally generated and maintained this ambiguity, with the implication that, by celebrating creative personalities, it was actually advocating for the very concept of the “social person,” and implicitly for the rights of man.

The main stakes of the critical evaluation underwent a substantial mutation: an author could have been openly charged not for taking refuge in his or her intimacy, as in the acutely totalitarian phase, but for not being personal enough. “Originality” is progressively seen not only as a matter of aesthetic adroitness, but also as a strategy of expressing or at least suggesting a position of moral autonomy.

In terms of social space, critical admiration implied the respectful, face-creating *distantiation* from the performance of an author who in his turn managed to *distance* himself from an attitude of social or ideological conformity (therefore giving a public *face* to the individual, the autonomous citizen). A particular author could, therefore, be charged with damaging the dignity of the Author for devaluing the instruments of literature (which should not only serve personal, subjective means, but also consolidate the public/political position of Subjectivity) by putting them to work for the official collectivist-mobilizationist propaganda.

The main stakes of this strategy that knitted together “face,” politeness and a form of paradoxically empathetic social distancing should be looked for in two other main directions. One of these directions is LC’s advocacy for the protective space of personal intimacy that an author should be granted in order to be able to create. LC was actually indulging in the strategic confusion between the person and the *persona*: the most intimate nucleus of the creative self, the paragon of its depth and its vulnerability, is paradoxically reversed into an extrovert, militant representation of the creative *power* of the person. The strategy of the Critic of saving the “face” of the Author could be described along the lines of Brown and Levinson’s argument in favor of the “negative face” (1987). “Freedom from imposition,” assumed by the two researchers to motivate the forms of politeness meant to spare a conversational partner the impression of being “cornered” or forced to do something, could be translated in the context of post-Stalinist LC as a strategy of weaving around the alleged frailty and vulnerability of the “creative personality” the protective veil of praise and admiration. Especially because they are intrusive, the critical proceedings call for attenuating, compensatory, penitent, “negative” strategies of social politeness.

This course of the post-Stalinist LC also implied a social pedagogy hinted at the political authorities, the power holders and the guardians of the Communist orthodoxy: they should be taught to respect the “natural rights” of the personal consciousness. LC meant to induce the Communist Magistrate, through a tactful indirect discourse allowing the addressee to “keep face,” the idea that, irrespective of its authority over their “bodies,” the personal consciousnesses of its subjects should be conceived of as inviolable.

Another line of development of the space-creating relationship between the Critic and the Author has to do with publicly exposing this very relationship as the interaction between the most intimate cores of two subjectivities. Post-Stalinist LC deployed a sophisticated rhetorical play of reducing or enlarging the distance between the creative consciousness and its observer. What is essential about this strategy is that it exemplifies in a powerful way a form of space that is essentially emergent. But not as a field of forces developed around the focus of a powerful creative personality, but as a field of communicative energy developed between the foci of two human consciousnesses. This confronts us with the paradoxical process

of creating “face” not from the outside, as asserted by the socio-linguistic theory of politeness (Vilkki 2006), but from within, through the work of identifying with the Other. From the perspective of the post-Stalinist social play, it could be said that by configuring/creating the face of the Author, the Critic was actually creating/consolidating his/her own face.

It is worth noticing that this strategy of controlling distances, of activating the mobility of the Critic-Author interstitial space, was actually two-fold. The respectful, face-creating distancing was balanced by the possibility of a disquieting closeness inducing, through extremely refined rhetorical means of suggestion, a sense of shame or guilt to those authors who gave in to the integrative pressures of the official ideology. The strategy of allusive culpabilization is itself indicative of the invention of a flexible, reactive, vivid and vibrant social space.

5. LC as a Peer Community: The Company of Critics

The last of the walks of the *social-space-as-public-space* generation in the post-Stalinist societies that is left to explore is the one referring to the mental intercourse within the LC community. The most important characteristic of these internal connections was that they both illustrated the idea and advocated for the value of intellectual pluralism. A diversity of opinions, knit together in the fabric of urbane conversation, indicated towards a deeper postulation of doubt as foundational for polite society. Actually, the positive attitude towards diversity of opinions was derived from the idea that politeness, as both a social code and a social philosophy, is the direct expression of understanding social cohesion as a community of doubt. This might be a proper manner of describing the essence of what is more commonly known as the “civil society.”

Under these circumstances, the toleration or even the celebration of literary pluralism became the quasi-overt indication of a certain disposition of consciousness, of the commitment to polishing one’s own self. Politeness, as expressed in a skeptical practice of refined observation and nuanced distinctions, functioned as a perpetual transgression from an aesthetic to an ethical perspective along the continuum of intellectual subtlety. In other words, politeness appeared as the correct/proper *form* of doubt, as the “orthodoxy” or rather the “orthomorphism” of doubt. And it has to be noticed that LC was especially well-placed in order to uphold such views because if the Communist ideological monopolists could not admit even the slightest public philosophical disputation over social or political matters, they were more comfortable with the apparently inoffensive judgments of taste and with the peaceful coexistence of a plurality of interpretations of a literary (master)piece.

On the other hand, the value of pluralism was advocated by LC as an expression of “creativity,” of intellectual “fecundity,” that was acceptable for the

official post-Stalinist cultural policy since it might have been construed as demonstrating the “fullness” and “richness” of life in a Socialist society. An advocacy for intellectual diversity had to simulate the most natural harmony with the post-Stalinist version of the “pursuit of happiness,” with the ideal of a multilateral realization of individual aspirations and potentialities harbored by the Communist authorities.²

Actually, what the post-Stalinist censorship tolerated was a limited and strictly controlled plurality of the means of expression, without any relativization of the core tenets of the official ideology (Haraszi 1987). But literary criticism hosted a cluster of strategies hinted at tacitly transgressing the Communist party project of a strictly controlled, mainly ornamental political liberalization. The idea of diversification was suspended/bracketed from within the ideological discourse. Especially in the critical practice, plurality was construed and deployed as touching not only on the form of expression or analytical methods, but also on the substance of opinion and conviction. The eminently benevolent rituals and mannerisms of the critical polite conversation gradually promoted pluralism not as a means to an imposed common end, but as a finality to itself.

LC could make an open theoretical connection between diversity understood as a community of doubt and diversity understood as the celebration of intellectual dynamics and creativity under the provision that this connection was inserted in the official ideological framework. The official Marxian epistemology claimed that, given its indisputably material essence, the world is entirely cognizable. But given the Marxian commitment to the dialectical method, the totalization of knowledge can never be definitive. Therefore the philosophical subtleties of dialectic materialism allowed for a metaphorical use of the notion of “mystery,” understood as the unknown that lays ahead of the cognitive consciousness, submitted to objective laws that are material and predictable in nature but which, for the time being, have not been discovered by human intelligence. Indeterminacy is conceived as provisional and transitory. It is not objective, it is only an effect produced by the temporary limitation of the data available to the cognitive subject. But even so, “indeterminacy” could be admitted in the vocabulary and mental frame of the official Socialist epistemology.

This allowed for the generation of an imaginary *prospective* public space, configured around a definition of doubt as a strategy of approximating the future. Cognitive doubt, seen primarily not as a confrontation of opinions, but as an open process of interrogation and self-interrogation, could simultaneously be construed as

² E.g., Article 13 of the Constitution of the slightly liberalized 1965 Constitution of the Socialist Republic of Romania: “In the Socialist Republic of Romania all state activity is aimed at the development of the system and the prosperity of the socialist nation, the continual rise of material and cultural well-being, the assurance of liberty and human dignity, and the multilateral assertion of the human personality.” (Translated in Simons 1980, 320)

the major means of adapting to uncertainty. LC promoted the intimate connection between intelligence and uncertainty, the “future” (a matter of consensual concern, if not of consensual solutions) being itself defined as a field of tensional (inspiring) uncertainties. The last representation of the generation of public space that could be attributed to LC is embedded in this projection/exploration/imagination of the future: a public space defined by a dynamics of uncertainty and by a certain freedom of hypothesizing, a social space born from a break in the prophetic self-confidence (i.e., the pretense of controlling the future) of the official Communist ideology.

5. Speculative conclusions for a speculative undertaking

This survey of the intricate condition of literary criticism in post-Stalinist Eastern European societies allowed me to test the theoretical potential of a couple of concepts such as “polite conversation” and “polite society,” which in Western Europe are generally seen as fully historicized (in the sense of having become history, of having been fully metabolized by the dominant social culture). I also attempted to retrieve the classical notion of “politeness” from the stock of concepts of the school of discourse analysis. Pragmatists place it in a system of reference that connects a theory of basic psychological needs with rational choice theory and with a rather ahistorical and transcultural perspective on the communicative interaction that reduces it to the one-sided acception of “face.” My use of it was meant to return the concept of politeness to its classical richness and to its “natural” cultural and historical embeddedness. My agenda has been to regenerate the notion of politeness also by associating it to other notions such as “public space,” “civil society,” and, last but not least, “literary criticism.”

But the most important result of the above exploration has been the typology of space-producing strategies associated with the post-Stalinist practice of literary criticism. In my opinion, the qualitative differences between the forms of social space created through these channels are as important as their similarities. I distinguished: a form of space whose actual fabric consists in the play of deferent interpersonal communication; a form of space created by the “self-absorption” of Power (or by luring Power into restricting itself, into deferring society a minimal dignity/autonomy); a form of space generated through the oscillation between interpretations, attitudes, value perspectives, through a strategy of deliberate ambiguation, of creating semantic indeterminacy (a space undistinguishable from the intersubjective vibrations of an allusive, double-coded communication); a form of space generated by aesthetic admiration that neutralizes forced admiration for spectacle of political power (the distantiating imposed by the maintenance of a secular charisma of the work of art, which is opposed in form, but not necessarily in its broader democratically pro-active meaning to the concept of the critical “estrangement” as advanced by Brecht (see Robinson 2008); and finally a form of

prospective social space, generated as a consequence of representing the future as a field of co-present and interconnected mental experiments.

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