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MATEI CĂLINESCU - THE METAMORPHOSES OF THE CRITICAL CONCEPT

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Abstract: *The literary criticism Matei Călinescu practiced and theorized before his American exile had reverberations of the "Vianu model", such as the passion for ideas, for the systematic study of literature and for rigour. As a supporter of the primate of the axiological judgment, M. Călinescu has sympathies for neither Impressionism, nor Structuralism. Although he was not gifted for a career as a literary chronicler, he had contributed to the reconsideration of the aesthetical foundations of the Romanian literature during the 1960s, shifting direction afterwards towards compared literature and literary theory.*

Keywords: *literary criticism, post-Wars, axiological judgment, objectivity, coherence, rigour.*

1. Between two critical "models": Vianu and Călinescu

When the literary critics of the 60s debuted, there were two more frequented critical models – the "Vianu model" and the "Călinescu model". Matei Călinescu was back then, not only T. Vianu's assistant, in his last years of profession, but also his disciple. And he was not only an occasional disciple, but one having the same "classical" structure, one passionate about ideas and the systematic study of literature. M. Călinescu's parcourse is, up to a point, similar to that of his maestro: he starts as a literary chronicler, but he soon abandons the feuilletonism, favouring a career as a comparatist and theoretician, which was fulfilled especially after 1973, during his American exile. How great his fascination with the author of *Estetica* (*The Aesthetics*) was can be seen from the texts he generously dedicated to him; instead of a distant, glacial intellectual, M. Călinescu sees in T. Vianu a grave humanistic spirit, not lacking the inner tension, for whom the literary criticism meant "a form of life" (Călinescu, 1965, 164), and who combined thoroughness with devotion; in the arid style he was accused of, the same M. Călinescu chooses to see, first of all, clarity, lack of ostentation and even some poetic iridescences. His admiration goes so far that, later on, this portrait will be completed in order to make T. Vianu "a poet of culture and ideas", a classic in the Gidean sense of a "tamed Romanticism" (Călinescu, 1967, 123), as a result of a

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dramatic inner fight. The professor's "Classicism" was not a gift, but a conquest, the same as his rigour is but "a form of understanding, even a form of dedication and love (Călinescu, 1967, 124). Between the lines, there lies within these considerations a polemic with N. Manolescu and with his not at all pious ideas expressed about the "sorrow of erudition", about the much too theoretical-abstract vision of T. Vianu. Thus, to the gravity, inner tensions and "the poetry of rigour" will be added "his fundamental discretion", the expression, "intellectually – of an aptitude for distinctions, for grasping the differences, for classification; morally – of a rare capacity to restrain, of lucid self-control, of strict 'sifting' of the inner reactions" (Călinescu, 1973, 73-74). Considering himself to be initiated by T. Vianu "in the ethics of discretion and of the secret" "by a pedagogy of silence" (Călinescu, 1973, 75), all that M.Călinescu does is to put distance again between himself and the aggressive disinvolture of many of his fellow critics, with whom he shares no compatibility.

Apart from a an established custom of the place and times, which implies to pledge everything to a single critical model until it is surrounded by an aura of generally valid exclusivity, the author of *Conceptul modern de poezie* (*The Modern Concept of Poetry*) does not make this mistake, meaning that he doesn't bestow absolute value on his model. On the contrary, he writes substantially about the "Călinescu model", but seen as a possible point of reference and not as a personal one. And although he writes that during the polemic between the "Călinescians" and "anti- Călinescians", his writings comprise no hint of polemic. At first, the Călinescian style, seen as seductive and almost impossible to analyse, is characterised by some specific traits: "the high self-consciousness, the certitude of its genius endowment", "the lofty perspective" (Călinescu, 1965, 137-138) on every aspect; the classic, solar air, defined by the "altitude" and not the "profoundness" of the approaches; the capacity to make thinking sensitive and project it into the spectacular, that is to make a fundamentally "classic" thinking visible in a romantic manner (metaphorical and hyperbolical). Among the Călinescian considerations, M. Călinescu only retains the one concerning the creation in criticism, with the specification that an exegete of literature is not a creator of values, but only of creative perspectives on values; while the literary work is autotelic, the criticism has an exterior "telos" (the literary work) and, so, "a low degree of autotelism" (Călinescu, 1967, 119). In his attempt to bring forth the critical creation, G. Călinescu had tried, in fact, to enhance "the degree of autotelism of the criticism up to a level only the proper literature had" (Călinescu, 1967, 120). It was, practically, a revolt against the limits of the criticism, going as far as to support the utopia of a criticism which invents its object. The delimitation from this conception is discreet, without minimizing its impact on the autochthonous criticism which, after the Wars, gladly dallied with the idea of an artistic criticism.

2. The elements of the critical concept

Surprisingly, for M. Călinescu any lecture is a spontaneous, unprofessional form of criticism, this because the mere active attitude towards a book is to mentally formulate appreciations, comparisons or hierarchies. As an "ontological experience", the act of reading is never innocent, but contextualised and "judgmental". There are, still, differences between a common reader and a literary critic: the first is "*a consumer of values*, while the other

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appears to be endowed with the attributes of a *creator*" (Călinescu, 1965, 328-329). The critic needs qualities such as vocation, personality, talent and he must follow rules "meant to ensure the objectivity of his judgments, excluding the arbitrary, the impressionist subjectivism" (Călinescu, 1965, 331).

Objectivation is not the only concern of a critic, who has to prove that he "resonates, in his own private way, with the work of art", and to communicate "a specific, irreducible feeling", an "intellectual confession" (Călinescu, 1965, 332). Finally, the literary criticism is placed between "science" and "poetry", or, if judging by the models behind the two concepts, between T. Vianu and G.Călinescu: "Science by its methodology, by its aspiration to precision and objectivity, the literary criticism is also poetry by its secretly persuasive side, which implies that the reader is being introduced into a particular affective and intellectual climate" (Călinescu, 1965, 332). As a practitioner, M. Călinescu has a penchant for the scientific side of the criticism; "the poetry" of his reviews is rather one of rigour and clarity.

Rigoarea şi poezia criticii (*The Rigour and the Poetry of Criticism*), the foreword-text of *Eseuri critice* (*Critical Essays*), is relevant not only for the critic's perception about his own field, but also for the way the suggestions of the New Criticism were acclimatised to the autochthonous territory. R. Barthes from *Critică şi adevăr* (*Criticism and Truth*) is minutely analysed here, and there are more objections to his opinions than adhesions. The idea that the literary work is structurally multivalent, and thus able to be subjected to various interpretations, is amended by M. Călinescu, as the choice of the level of interpretation should not omit the axiological judgment: "any critical act presupposes the axiological judgment" (Călinescu, 1967, 9). The dogmatization of the new (structuralist) perspective is not accepted, not only because of the expulsion of axiology, but also due to its lack of diachronic dimension. Only the acceptation of the creative ("poetical") dimension of the criticism is considered one of the strengths of the new methodology. Still, what matters here is what is retained and what is omitted by Barthes' concept of criticism: on one hand, the opening of criticism towards a new specific formula of creation, on the other hand, the lack of adherence to the idea of eliminating the axiological judgment. These were the two matters of particular interest at the end of the '60s and the beginning of the '70s: the healing from the scars of the "vulgar sociologism" through the comeback to a form of aesthetic, creative criticism, and, in the same time, the effort to retrieve the values of the past and to preserve the values of the present – and hence the need for the axiological perspective.

In 1967, in *Ce este „La nouvelle critique"?* (*What is "La nouvelle critique"?*), the critic has already reviewed al the new methodologies, proving that, al least at that moment, he was the best informed about the European theoretical debate. Despite its diversity, the common characteristic of the new criticism is found in its adversity towards the positivistic, academic practices, and in the view on the literary text as an open, multivalent and inexhaustible language. While the works of J.-P. Richard, G. Poulet or J. Starobinski meet with his approval, those of R. Barthes produce new controversy, again on the subject of the refuse of historicity and of valorisation. The debate in the terms of "validity" and not in the terms of "truth" is thought acceptable only when it refers to the linguistic facts, and not when the literary facts are in debate. This is why his reserves towards the perspective on

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literature seen as a language which transforms the literary work into a "tough surface", reifies it. Defending the specific of the literary, M.Călinescu supports the obligation to consider the "aesthetic intention of the literary work" (Călinescu, 1970, 210), which demands valuation, not only verification from the point of view of the coherence of certain structures. As the new interpretative practices enrol in the algorithm of the Romanian critics, the reactions of the author of *Conceptul modern de poezie* (*The Modern Concept of Poetry*) become visible, expressed especially against the risky mix of terminology, which he labels as ignorance. The 'artistic' excesses, too, are not seen with a good eye, on the contrary, the fellow critics are cautioned to seek "temperance", "the anonymity of the infinite responsibility" (Călinescu, 1973, 49), which is, of course, utopian. By its mixture of rigour and poetry, of adequacy to the specific of the literary and maintainability of the axiological perspective, the critical vision of M.Călinescu is rippleless and follows a middle line, of equilibrium between academism and essayism.

3. The critical work

Titanul şi geniul în poezia lui Eminescu (*The Titan and the Genius in Eminescu's Poetry*), with the subtitle *Semnificaţii şi direcţii ale ethosului eminescian* (*Meanings and Directions of the Eminescian Ethos*), is the editorial debut of M.Călinescu, but he wagers between, on one hand, linking Eminescu's metaphysic negativism with the paradigm of modernity, and, on the other hand, on detailing the refuse of the "superior misfit" to consent to his degrading times (the realities of the '50s and the '60s are also hinted at subtextually). The analysis begins with a phrase that has the tone of the epoch: "We believe that this discussion must start by the examination of Eminescu's position towards his own times" (Călinescu, 1964, 7), which is one of romantic opposition, made either from the position of the Titan (reactive attitude, protest, manifest, revolt), or from the Genius' position (who asserts his disjunction by distance and refuge in contemplation). Although this romantic inadaptation is a more profound one, of metaphysical nature and not a strictly social one, the critic prefers to build his demonstration on the background of ambiguity, so as to be able to slip subversive accents where this is possible. "The Titan" and "The Genius" are definitions which come from the different interpretation of the Eminescian lyric by Titu Maiorescu and C. D. Gherea. The first of them connected this lyric with the geniality understood in a Schopenhauerian sense, as retreat in a type of contemplation which is equivalent not to indifference, but to "the sublimation and transfiguration of a profound inner drama" (Călinescu, 1964, 23); the second discerned the duality in Eminescu: an optimistic nature, came to waver between revolt and renunciation due to the influence of Schopenhauer's pessimism, but also because of the injustice of a more and more established bourgeoisie. According to M.Călinescu, "the Titan" characterizes more the poetry of his youth, while "the Genius" – that of his maturity. Unlike the monograph of Eugen Simion from the same year – his debut, *Proza lui Eminescu* (*Eminescu's prose*), that of M.Călinescu, less descriptive and superior-analytical, is able to organize its subject form an integrative perspective, and introduces an element of novelty: coming into contact with Schopenhauer's ideas during a period of romantic conscience crisis, Eminescu appropriates them in an original manner, so that they acquire various specific

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nuances in his writings. The polemic Titanism, the connection with nature, the Eros, the prophetic, the pathetism, the satire – are elements which do not concur with the orthodox Schopenhauerianism, but they contribute, in fact, to the Eminescian originality. The critic's conviction, a slightly risky one, but verified with the texts which sustain his hypothesis, is that Eminescu would have somehow sensed the forthcoming crisis of the romantic pessimism and would have anticipated many of the incompatibilities of the modernity: "Eminescu is the discoverer of a vast sensibility, which anticipates some of the specific directions of evolution of our literature in the XXth century" (Călinescu, 1964, 202). It is an opinion which did not change with time and is stated again, in a radical form, in the second edition of *Conceptul moderm de poezie* (*The Modern Concept of Poetry*) (2002): Eminescu's "modernity" is pushed beyond the intuition of the romantic crisis towards the impersonality and musicality of the modern lyric, which he would have influenced "seminally" (Călinescu, 2002, 184).

Aspecte literare (*Literary Aspects*) is a volume of which, owing to the ideological side-slips, M.Călinescu was not at all proud, more that that, he disavowed it in the end. But this does not mean that it should simply be overlooked. The two sections of the book (one referring to the writers between the two World Wars which survive the second, the other, to the proper after Wars writers, some of them mere debutants at the time) are quite uneven, shifting the balance in favour of the critic and not the literary chronicler. N. Manolescu noticed, when the volume appeared, the elegant and unostentatious discourse, its "lack of pose and spectacular gesture", the evenness of the critical voice, the systematic and "superior-didactic" spirit of the interpretations, conducted classically; "accustomed to pay the proper respect to the literary work and to examine it with prudence, but minutely". M.Călinescu is suspected of having a "too static" manner of looking into literature and that does not recommend him for a career as a literary chronicler, as he fails to include here "the pleasure to take the risk to be the first to shape an opinion, to discover, to check with himself on a virgin territory" (Manolescu 242-244). This verdict is correct and is not so different from that of C. Regman, who is also convinced that "we are dealing with a 'well-tempered' structure, rather categorial than categorical and passionate, meaning that between valuation and classification, he wagers towards the second operation" (Regman 101). The feuilletonism is an inappropriate coat for the descendant of T. Vianu, who is already true to his own sensibility, accustomed to vast perspectives and not at all to the depths of the literary text, and who is rather drawn towards consolidation and classification than diagnosis. This is why the studies which deserve attention are those included the in first part of the volume, those which are an attempt to describe the metamorphoses of the Romanian symbolism by analysing the poetry of G.Bacovia, Ştefan Petică and I.Minulescu. In what the author of *Plumb* (*Plumbum*) is concerned, the idea of "pose", "mask" or "artificiality" is rejected, and the stakes are placed on the authentic existentialist load of this type of poetry, which is defined by the strive for complete anonymity. Living the experience of the inferno as boredom, monotony, as pain muffled by the quotidian gloomy décor, G. Bacovia has, in fact, reformed the autochthonous symbolism, shook its aesthetics off and turned it into an unsettling testimony. The same aim, the specification (integration in the national literature) of symbolism is also what drives Ştefan Petică, a poet whose

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tendency for 'livresque' and aesthetics becomes novel by pathetic accents and by his penchant for "the pictorial quality of poetry" (Călinescu, 1965, 33) and not for the musical suggestions.

In what concerns the contemporary poetry, the critic – as a literary reviewer – discloses his limitations: besides the lingering ideological appreciations, his texts are also in the wrong for conformism and generality. The selection of names is at fault (Nina Cassian and Veronica Porumbacu could have been certainly left aside), his analyses go a pinch too far with the exploration of the "revolutionary" contents, the verdicts are worn (some deficiencies are, repeatedly in his essays, dispatched somewhere at the end of the analysis), and when his attention is finally directed toward poets valuable indeed (N.Stănescu, C.Baltag sau Ana Blandiana), all that happens is that ideas already expressed are quoted, sometimes accompanied by the identification of general traits of the generation they were constituting. Of all these inconveniences, the most bothering are the concessions to the ideology, some of them mind-blowing; *Laudele* (*Eulogies*) of Miron Radu Paraschivescu, dedicated to the Communist Party, are included among "the most accomplished of the poetries enliven by political pathos of our entire new lyric" (Călinescu, 1965, 207); *Libertatea de atrage cu puşca* (*The Freedom to Shoot the Rifle*) is, similarly, "a pathetic document of an intellectual generation who, convinced of the failure of capitalism, have not yet found – in the years of the great conflagration – the way of the revolutionary fight" (Călinescu, 1965, 271), not to speak of *Dimineţile simple* (*The Plain Mornings*) of Viorica Porumbacu – "an eloquent lyrical testimony of the woman's destiny in socialism" (Călinescu, 1965, 287).

With *Eseuri critice* (*Critical Essays*), M.Călinescu returns to his old self and excels at rigour, shows more freely his interest in literary theory, ushers himself into the comparatist approach. For the first time, his interest hovers over the English and American literature. There are two essays which provide data about the critic's preferences; the first is about Mateiu Caragiale – "a writer for writers", a "classic, impelled by the principle of minute labour and chiselling", but having the symbolist cult for enigmatic, crepuscular, bizarre and refinement (Călinescu, 1967, 60-61). The artistic labour and the declined, alexandrine spirit – these are the ingredients of a writing formula that M. Călinescu savours any time he comes across it. The second essay that reveals something of his preoccupations is *Urmuz şi comicul absurdului* (*Urmuz and the Irony of the Absurd*), where the theme of "*alienation through language*" (Călinescu, 1967, 72) appears for the first time, announcing a new critical age for him, (which will culminate with *Conceptul modern de poezie – The Modern Concept of Poetry*). Republished, with a Post-scriptum in *Eseuri despre literatura modernă* (*Essays on Modern Literature*), the text debates the absurd at Urmuz as a "poetic absurd, in the sense that it invents its own, absolute rigour" (Călinescu, 1970, 90), almost similar to that of Mallarmé. This is yet another constant of Călinescu's writing: when he wants to make the eulogy of a literary writing or a literary phenomenon, he compares it with poetry. Placed, in his personal hierarchy, at the top of the spiritual pyramid, poetry is indeed in the highest degree capable to bring forth onto the world a plus of meaning and rigour.

Listed by L. Raicu among those animated with the desire "to build enduring structures on a quaking terrain, to consolidate plausible structures from the

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fluid and discontinued substance of the literature" (Raicu 286), M. Călinescu will confirm this profile with every new published book, starting with *Eseuri despre literatura modernă* (*Essays on the Modern Literature*) – the volume where the problem of the modernity is already tackled about the "relationship between literature and language" (Călinescu, 1970, 6). Here, the idea of Avant-garde, Modernism, or Classicism and Fantastic take shape; the terminology he uses comes especially from the structuralist sphere, is artfully mastered and used strictly within the limits of its functionality, even with some amending interventions when the meta-language might seem to be strident; for instance, following the experience of the Avant-garde, literature has acquired "a clearer conscience than ever of its own *literarity* (please forgive me the rebarbative term)" (Călinescu, 1970, 111). The writer's attitude is rather of one who clarifies, through a system of reading which requires "the proceeding calmness, the methodical repose, the detachment, the look from outside" (Raicu 290). His interest for the English and American literature and the comparatism become a rule from now on.

Before going into exile, M. Călinescu publishes a last volume in his country – *Fragmentarium* – which is a good-bye to the literary chronicle. The reviews gathered here are of a subtle analytical quality rather than axiological. Their author has been not for a moment in the avant-garde of the post-Wars feuilletonism, but he placed himself on purpose a few steps behind, so that, like for M. Martin, the critical verdict should be inferred by the mere choice of a literary work, after the selection has been performed by others. Deeply mulled over, the text allows at least two of his preoccupations to be seen: on one hand, that of acquiring a bird eye's view, even if on the way, over some of the well-seen post-Wars writers; on the other hand, the tendency to talk about Poetry and Prose starting from poets and writers, the theoretical pressure starting to grow more and more. Otherwise, the following shift can be noticed: in the company of the literary works, M. Călinescu tends to become a theoretician, as the exploration of the literary concepts and ideas is flexible and critically applied, with no anchylosis. Nichita Stănescu's lyric occasioned a so-called poetized comment, but in a – naturally – cerebral register: "From the word to the non-word, through the non-word: a cross-over of the word – this seems to me to be the meaning of poetry for N. Stănescu" (Călinescu, 1973, 91). The evolution from a lyrics of latencies, of germination, towards "enigmas", and, then, to an abstract form of poetic language is to the taste of the critic who restricts his analysis to the content and vision, indifferent to the formal aspects. Nonetheless, truly satisfied would he be only with the poetry of M. Ivănescu (with whom, as a poet, he was close), for which he has an excellent intuition and which he analyses accurately at a time when it does not have critics to match it (except L. Raicu and Gh. Grigurcu). It is a poetry which does not only speak frankly about the crises of the modernity, but it even succeeds to change the critic's vision on the genre: "I believed, until not long ago, that poetry is – it has to be – a sort of speech therapy: that it has to heal, be it through the unspeakable, the speech of the diseases which gnaw at it: the received ideas, the triteness, the inert precision or the limp subtleties. But – who knows – maybe poetry has yet a different calling (…) – to go deeper into the language diseases, to enhance their awareness, to bring them to obsessive intensity and to cast a painful light on the deceiving structures of the language"

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(Călinescu, 1973, 100). M. Călinescu is so certain that he came across the secret of this poetry of self-alienation, of the void, of the vulnerability of the humane, that he takes the risk to anticipate (and he is not mistaken) the titles of the following volumes: "The first volume of M. Ivănescu is entitled *Stanzas*, the second, *Poems*, the third will probably be *Poetries*, and the following, as I would like to believe, *More Stanzas, More Poems*, and so forth" (Călinescu, 1973, 101). As to lay laurels atop of his favourite, the critic takes yet another step, observing a "Mallarméan spirit" (Călinescu, 1973, 107) in this poetry, which, coming from him, is the equivalent of the superlative praise.

4. A Conclusion

Among our "artists" of the criticism of the '60s, M. Călinescu detaches himself (together with M. Martin, L. Ciocârlie or S. Alexandrescu), as a partisan of the artistic rigour. Later on, in his theoretical studies, he behaved as a critic among theoreticians. The literary theory has more to gain from his experience as a literary critic than the literary criticism from his experience as a theoretician, as the domain of the literary ideas has only to gain from M. Călinescu, from his carefulness for specificity, for context and for the appropriate.

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