A Spoken… Literary History

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Abstract: During the communist period, literary history recorded its main events through the writing of experts in the field. The resulting image is undoubtedly truthful and it renders in its entirety the evolving "scale of values" of Romanian literature, including the literature of the last half a century, a period supposed to have been affected by the distortions operated by the political climate.
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During the communist period, literary history recorded its main events through the writing of experts in the field. The resulting image is undoubtedly truthful and it renders in its entirety the evolving "scale of values" of Romanian literature, including the literature of the last half a century, a period supposed to have been affected by the distortions operated by the political climate. The maintenance of the necessary balance is an undeniable fact, despite some "interventions" of the last two decades, which aimed to be the seismograph of the intrusions of social command; in other words, of the communist propaganda in matters of literary art and its main themes. The only element remaining under question refers to a certain attitude, to the "official character of the enterprise of those who approached literary history, which disregarded the immanence of the ideological factor ("the Party is everything"), implying, beyond the configuration of artistic hierarchies, the non-interference in state politics, considered as extraneous to literature itself. We had therefore a panoramic image of our literary landscape which lacked, due to a subtle ablution of memory, the ideological component, perfectly substituted by aesthetic arguments of expressivity or the art of the word. Contemporary Romanian history was projected by the same literary historians on an apparently atemporal axis, albeit Romanian. In this manner, the literary histories and works of criticism dedicated to the prominent figures of Romanian writing were confined solely to the aesthetic realm, away from the revolutionary enthusiasm which haunted society like an epidemic and found fervent adepts in other sectors. In conclusion, our literary histories were sincere, but somehow incomplete, or rather, between the lines of their substance; the careful reader could easily discover the feared secret of Polichinelle: the things known only too well to everyone were no longer mentioned.

However, beyond the written literary history, which it came to complete, there also circulated in the literary forums an unwritten, oral literary history, in which the passages we called Polichinelle's secret occupied a privileged position. The false values promoted according to "Party and state lines", consistently omitted from the above mentioned literary histories, were subject to severe criticism and bitterly ironic admonitions, while the personalities who could hardly be mentioned – not in writing, but in a whisper – were restored to their rights. Nevertheless, this unwritten literary history righted official wrongs, that is, those ignored in the literary histories, and it did so in an absolutely transient manner, as the truths exposed in such contexts did not last longer than the oxygen expired from the speaker's lungs. We all know about the existence of those unwritten (oral) literary histories and agree that, on the whole, they completed the picture by reintegrating in the natural corpus the artists regarded as undesirable by the Party.

Besides the situation depicted above, we note the existence of yet another component, brought to the attention of the reading public and of those acquainted with literary history by the continuation of the "Rotonda" series, initiated by the Publishing House of the Romanian Literature Museum, mind you, in conditions of freedom and democracy. It is a well-known fact that after 1989 there appeared numerous historical-literary texts, whose ideas rehabilitated literary ideas, personalities or literary-artistic tendencies. This proved useful for those interested in learning the

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truth, primarily due to the change of the political regime. However, we should not evade the reality that, after the fall of communism, writers who were very devoted to the Party policy discovered, in the innermost recesses of their hearts, a fierce opposition towards the ideas they had borne like a torch in the dark. There are, therefore, cases of hilarious dissidence and anti-communism which can in no way prove their verity, according to the well-known fact that the number of heroes increases in direct proportion with the distance from the event. Consequently, concerning the texts written after 1990, there lingers a permanent state of uncertainty, which should make us question at least some of them. This is not the case for oral testimonies, belonging to confessional genres, testimonies formulated before 1989 and which, due to auspicious circumstances, were recorded and restored to us as period documents of literary history.

To begin with, we should stress the idea that, albeit ephemeral in character, these confessions enjoyed the privilege of not circulating in society under the guise of gossip, but of being perpetuated under the protection of anonymity among lovers of literature and literary history. They had a different status, that of apophthegm. True, they gave an impression of ephemerality, but the fact that they were shared among the most fervent literature lovers also speaks for itself. Just as significant is the fact that, by contrast with the books they wrote, where the official point of view prevailed even by omission, this time these same authors spoke in earnest. As luck would have it, one hundred tapes, recorded on magnetic tape during the period when the "Rotonda 13" unfolded, were placed in the MNLR archive and can still be played with high fidelity, close to one hundred per cent.

Of course, their first merit is that they evince a series of arguments regarding the importance of texts of the memoir kind. In the postscript written for "13 Rotonde 13" (1976), the literary historian Nicolae Florescu remarked, concerning the memoir (confessional genre), that there was an obvious disproportion between European literature and Romanian literature. The paucity of this kind of literature, in comparison with other aesthetic categories and species, spoke for itself about the necessity of editing memoir texts, so the literary historian drew our attention to the uniqueness of the phenomenon designated by the phrase "Rotonde 13". The same Nicolae Florescu considered literary confessions as chronicles of lived events and as retrospective radiographies of one's existence.

In his capacity as author of the preface for the second volume, "Other 13 Rotonde 13" (1981), the late Edgar Papu stated that memoirs, journals, private confessions come to complete the "unseen facets of literature". Both critics emphasized the anecdotal quality of these species of artistic literature, which gives either "colour to the portrait", or the "character biography", as Edgar Papu says, arguing: "They [evocations, memoirs, private confessions] refer not to the empirical biography of a writer, but to his "character" biography. [We would extend the observation to the epoch and society as well.] We must therefore capture certain fundamental constants in the psychic structure of the writers who make the focus of our research. By detecting some precise character types on a human plane, we may discover essential features in the creations generated by such structures, features which neither biographical positivist criticism, nor phenomenological criticism has the means to discover. Or, as we have noted before, "Rotonda 13" appears effectively helpful in this operation." But we wouldn't be entirely fair if we did not mention, as similarly inaugural, the initiative of the academic critic D. Caracostea, a personality still insufficiently known at the level of his real complexity. Preoccupied by the genesis of verbal art, Caracostea organized, between 1932 and 1935, a series of "literary confessions" involving, by an a priori coincidence, 13 of the important writers of the inter-war period: Octavian Goga, I. Al. Brătescu-Voineşti, Gala Galaction, Tudor Arghezi, Mihail Sadoveanu, Ion Minulescu, Ion Agârbiceanu, Liviu Rebreanu, Ion Pillat, Ion Barbu, Jean Bart, Cincinat Pavelescu, Panait Istrati.

Literary confessions had proved long before their complementariness and particular utility. "Rotonde 13", title under which the events organized by the National Museum of Romanian Literature became known, continued to take place, in their established good tradition, on the 13th of each month, a date observed strictly, save a few, well-justified exceptions, when the date was moved a little before or after what we believe to be the lucky day of this unique phenomenon in

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Romanian culture. “Rotonde 13” was and is a literary phenomenon. It is not known who came up with the idea of the “rotonda”. The central hall of the museum represents, by its very shape, an intuitive opening. However, we could also consider the equally intuitive approach of the round space which suggests, in the spirit of Hasdeu, the quality of a medium necessary for the occult connection of great spirits. The founder of the institution, the prescient Perpessicius, had founded the museum as a sacred place, where the “flame of the Romanian word” should be kept eternally alive. All these… suggestions are to be found in the cultural format bearing the name of “Rotonde 13”, but the greatest merit, for the enormous success which the “Rotonde” enjoyed and have continued to enjoy, was that of Şerban Cioculescu, who can be considered without hesitation the providential personage of these meetings initiated decades before, which filled his exquisite rotund hall. To enjoy a special attention, these literary reunions needed a guiding spirit, who had a vast knowledge of literary history and criticism, doubled by a taste for the anecdotal, cultivated with great gusto. The presence of the learned Şerban Cioculescu as moderator, or host, to use a much fashionable word, filled them with the irresistible charm of his personality. It is to him that we owe the ideal format of these confessions and evocations. It is to his verve, satirical at times, to his philological omniscience, to the lively spirit with which he knew how to lead, but most of all to entertain, by adding whenever necessary the ingredients meant „to spice up” a too monotonous discourse or a morose intervention, that we owe the great success of the format. The retorts of „Şerban the Malicious” (ex-libris adopted following a caricature and article signed by Gh. Tomozei) turned into fulminantly polemic interventions when the discussion risked running out of fuel. His charismatic personality, his refined humour, sometimes pungent, sometimes tender, always sublimated the atmosphere of the „rotonde” into an exceptional intellectual show, making the memory of Şerban Cioculescu the tutelary spirit of these „Rotonde”. At over 80 years of age, Şerban Cioculescu’s thinking proved encyclopaedic, the diction of his ideas articulated in a language of fresh judgement and of a modernity scarcely found among our contemporaries.

The „Rotonde” continued after Şerban Cioculescu’s death, in the absence of the spirit able to concentrate the general atention, but their emotional and participative intensity and even their importance dwindled. But the idea was worth keeping alive and, while waiting for a new catalyzing spirit, the „Rotonde” organized by MNLR continued. We remind those interested by confessional literature that in the MNLR archive there are almost 100 magnetoscope tapes, which have been preserved to cover the period from the initial moment to the present of this evocation. The coming out of the “Rotonde” in print answered the imperative of a faithful rendition of the oral testimonies. The texts were copied accurately, without any interventions by either interpolations or “cuts”.

This fact cannot be emphasized enough, since the evocations point back to that time which reclaimed, even in cultural contexts, its tribute of encomium addressing the politics of the Party. However, it has been noted that they are rather insignificant and only observe the appellative of “comrade”, perhaps as annoying today as it was for some in the past.

The plethora of publications after 1989 ushers in a stringently topical debate, inaugurated by “The Present Moment and Editing the Classics.” This urgency was due to the fact that three decades before, when the discussion was under way, the guests expressed critical and extremely virulent viewpoints about that situation, considered to be, generally speaking, a mere starting point. But the “official” pages of that period only spoke of “great achievements”. After the liberalization of the literary phenomenon, beneficent in all respects, the minimal protection of elitist culture (while mass culture undergoes a boom) goes through a historical syncope. That is why the initial text of this volume can be usefully considered as a vademecum for those eager for orientation in the great confusion maintained, perhaps unintentionally, by numerous neophytes in the world of contemporary philology and editing.

The publishing of the 4th volume marked the transposition of the “Rotonde” archive, previously recorded on electromagnetic tapes, in a digital format, which salvaged the whole archive. The texts are genuine period documents. For instance, those dedicated to writers associated with the intellectual left (Panait Istrati, N.D. Cocea, Emil Isac, Zaharia Stancu, George Bacovia, Cezar Petrescu), could stir up reactions, attitudes, protests, especially now, with all the talk about a new

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trial of communism. From a historical literary viewpoint, in the name of truth, it is both beneficent and useful that the facts should be presented in their stark nudity. The reader of the "Rotonde" might be surprised to find revealing testimonials, some of which refer to the obstinate repeatability of history. The political radicalism and the generally radical ideas of some of the spokespersons of the aforementioned "Rotonde" displays in the respective pages a kind of ignorance burdened by the tragic silence of forgetfulness. In this respect, the interventions we are referring to are, although on an opposite plane, almost identical with some contemporary discourses: the same rejection, in corpore, of the arguments/facts which come in contradiction with one's own principles and opinions, a kind of vehemence which may lead one to believe that in our country, if not all over the world, rightness (I avoid calling it truth) is always on the part of the one who has won, who has suddenly become powerful, called by an eternally valid name, "the winner". Many of the "certainties" of those who, in their speeches back then, were keen to specify the immanence of their rightness, are denied today and dismissed as blatant lies, unfortunately, from the standpoint of the same intolerant attitude. Just because between justice and truth the demarcation lines are either too thin or too frail to sustain any bridges of communication, a historical-literary debate on this topic, which, albeit hardly begun, is able to stir so much passion, can be considered a significant chapter. The "rotonde" are meant to be a literary document brought to light, salvaged from oblivion. The "rotonde" comprised in the 5th volume bring up other issues which deserve at least a commentary. In the attempt to order the ideas pervading the hundreds of pages recorded from the magnetic tapes, our attention is drawn by a few issues.

A less known fact refers to the homage brought to certain living personalities, such as D.I. Suchianu. Having become a particular kind of conference, the "Rotonde" indicates that the privilege of such meetings was only granted to those writers who, by the personality show they could put on at any moment, could compete, with an unmatched savour, with the relatively few cultural alternatives of those years. In the majority of cases, they occasioned some extremely interesting historical-literary evocations, due, to say the least of it, either to their bringing moral reparations to the ones being celebrated or due to some of the guests (speakers). One should be reminded of the fact that the rigid institutional environment had officialized, at least as far as cultural publishing was concerned, standardized discourse types, "aligned" with regard to the biography, the work and the subjects under discussion… Despite the censorship operating especially on the written word, be it in cultural journals or in volume pages, which we have already mentioned, the same authors act with less constraint at the "Rotonde". Allusions or truths which never appeared on the written page are inserted or "spoken out loud" in this ambiance. They render an image which is closer to the writerly reality of an epoch compared to a dark, medieval atmosphere. The atmosphere of the debates which animated the literary-eulogistic manifestations was that of an agora where the praise of truth prevailed over the amicus Partidus, if we are allowed this analogy. In such context, fair judgment was emphatically stated, the freedom of thought of some of the speakers eliciting the applause and implicitly the approval of the audience.

Another characteristic of some of the "rotonde", of those politically thematized in particular, is given by the veiled, ubiquitous language ("tongue-in-cheek"), in which we cannot know if the speaker expresses praise or criticism. According to Victor Eftimiu's witticism ("Congratulate me, but from a distance, because you spit me while congratulating me"), some speakers are defiant or melt their irony in cynicism. Numerous allusions are made to the realities of the moment, allusions which, due to the growing temporal distance, should be explained in future through footnotes, as is customary with critical editions edited by literary historians of philological formation. For instance, the well-known dispute of the 1980's, between Al. Piru and the "Eugen Barbu group" from the "Week" review, is settled by an intervention of the famous literary historian, through an allusion to the "shop boys", which refers, of course in a pejorative way, to Eugen Barbu's play, "Do Not Make Yourself a Shop with a Staircase", staged in those years.

Furthermore, by contrast, nor do the "Rotonde" lack the rhynocerized discourses of certain committed writers, enrolled as political activists. They are revealed in all the "splendour" of a wooden language which disqualifies them, now as it did then. But, if we may generalize, the texts

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revealed to the public demonstrate that Romanian literature, whether at top level or through its prominent personalities, was not in reality (yes, we admit that there were also false personalities) at the discretion of the political or subordinated to its demands.

Finally, what seems full of significance to us is also the fact that, although they illustrate different epochs, from the establishment of the memoir format to the contemporary period, that is for almost four decades, the "Rotonde", evince an undying generation gap, a very old… topical issue, so that, for instance, the fronde of the generation 2000 towards contemporary writers does not really bring anything new. This is a warning for us all. The faithful readers of the "rotonde" will discover historical-literary information unknown so far, they will live or relive, as a genuine feast, the indefinable atmosphere of those literary colloquia. These are, therefore, well-founded arguments for the reconsidering of this special literary-memorial itinerary, meant to cast a new light on our national literature, especially because, in the several hundreds of audio recordings existing in the MNLR archive, there are a few scores of original recordings unknown to the public at large.

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