RADU IONESCU - A MILESTONE IN THE EVOLUTION OF HOW POETRY AND CRITICISM ARE SEEN IN ROMANIAN LITERATURE

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Abstract: *The evolution of Romanian literary theory and criticism roughly fits the great development stages of modern Romanian literature, effectively contributing to its ideological and aesthetic orientation, and to its advance. Therefore, I do not think it is too much to say when one claims that Romanian literary theory and criticism were born together with modern Romanian literature. Our first literary critics were well educated, well-read, and often translated without mentioning the original author. The studies of Radu Ionescu will try to prove that the purpose of literary works is to reveal and nurture the idea of beauty, while that of criticism is to contribute to its understanding and advancement.*

Keywords: *Superior criticism, aesthetic value, philosophical perspective.*

The arrival of critical thinking in Romania, the process of its taking shape in the early decades of the 19th century can be explained by the influence of the Enlightenment, which, once it arrived here, inspired consciences to take a critical view of society and envisage a world free of theology and dogmatism. After the impetus of the Enlightenment followed the idea of social and cultural progress, the idea of *the better, the more beautiful* made its way into all fields of thought, and the first field where it was applied here was literature. But since at the beginning of the 19th century the breadth of literature included all written cultural expressions, the viewpoint was more closely linked to language and linguistic articulation. In a first phase, literary criticism became a matter of language criticism.

In the times of the 1848 generation, culture and literature acquired a strongly militant character, thus resulting in scarce attention given to the aesthetic, while social issues took precedence (see Ion Heliade Radulescu's famous call to his contemporaries, "Write as much as you can, as best as you can".) In its beginning stage, the direction of development of Romanian criticism went from culture to language and only at the end toward literature. Following the example of Western literary criticism, Romanian critical thinking started to feel the need for analysis, to compare and amend literary output. The abundance of writings demanded criticism apt to clear the way and give appropriate guidance.

As Tudor Vianu remarked, Romanian culture was at that time caught in a confusion of values and was struggling with a fuzzy distinction between art and science. European literary ideologues (Voltaire, Rousseau, La Harpe, Marmontel, Levizac) had laid the foundation of Romanian literary theory and criticism.

Raised under the wing of Alexandru Odobescu, Radu Ionescu was a thinker on poetry and the fine arts. He was the instrument that brought about the aesthetic development stage of Romanian literature. Being familiar with the works of Hegel, and in the spirit of his *Aesthetics*, Radu Ionescu defined beauty in opposition to science and by reference to truth (which Titu Maiorescu would also do later).

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His *Principiile criticei* (Principles of Criticism) is a true leap in the quality of thought, brilliantly foreboding the position later to be taken by T. Maiorescu. With his limpid style and familiarity with leading notions of contemporary philosophy and aesthetics, Radu Ionescu sought to explain artistic expression and the principles on which art criticism should be based. He would say that art is a fruit of inspiration, not of reflection (see T. Maiorescu - the object of poetry is a feeling, a passion, and not an intellectual thought.) Speaking about the purpose of art, R. Ionescu discusses the theory of art as imitation, which he rejects, stating that art does not merely reproduce images of reality, but transforms them, and brings them closer to the type of ideal beauty.

The concept of impersonal catharsis is seen by R. Ionescu even since 1861 as the end purpose of art. He is our first theoretician to speak of a superior criticism, also pointing out its principles. While making an admirable apology of criticism, R. Ionescu also delves on literary criticism, which covers all creations of the spirit. He is the one who gave, before Maiorescu, a fruitful definition of criticism.

A consistently Hegelian thinker, R. Ionescu grants poetry unlimited powers: it is and has always been humanity's teacher. His discourse on poetry is carried further in his *Despre poezie şi frumoasele arte* (On Poetry and the Fine Arts), a study published a year before *Principles of Criticism*.

Writing at a time when political writing is strikingly more valuable than poetry (a stilted poetry, even though sometimes interesting or ground-breaking through its themes), Ionescu has not secured his place in the history of Romanian culture thanks to his excellent political journalism, but by virtue of a series of highly interesting articles on literary theory and criticism, as well as by his poems - that are more than modest - published in his youth. In these fields of work, Ionescu is distinguished by his merits of being a forerunner, first of all of Maiorescu, in the latter's establishment of a program and a direction of criticism. The writer had a very unusual, at the time, knowledge of literature, philosophy, and aesthetics: he translated works by Poe, was familiar with - and competently discussed - Classical poetry, Hugo's Romantic poetics, but also the realist poetics in Balzac's novels; he quoted and used Hegel's Lectures on Aesthetics; he showed a deep knowledge of Plato, of Descartes, but also of contemporary thinkers (Proudhon, Pierre Leroux).

Ionescu was therefore a spirit of serious intellectual upbringing, and well-versed on the latest trends of thought - including in philosophy. Following the pronouncements of T. Vianu, later criticism mostly retained the Hegelian component of his aesthetic thinking. His quoting and use of Hegel's philosophy is indisputable and significant: but even more significant is how the Hegelian perspective (whose educational component is generally removed) is connected to the older Platonic dominant of the 1848 Romantic thought (this clarification does not refer to the study of sources, since Hegel is an acknowledged source, but a more precise definition of post-1848 thinking in relation to, on the one hand, the thinking of the 1848 generation, and with that of Junimea's generation, on the other).

In his 1855 preface to G. Sion's edition of D. Bolintineanu's Poems, which included his *Epistolă amicului G. Sion* (Epistle to My Friend G. Sion), Ionescu elaborates the theory of the "ideal beauty" to which poetry takes us, because "our life is a long exile [...]. Our weary soul sometimes wills to fly [...] to once again see the ideal, its heavenly realm." What is discussed here is not the Hegelian idea (since to Hegel the Idea is lived in nature as in an "otherness of itself"), but the isolated Platonic idea (as in *Timaios*), in a cosmic home from which we are exiled. A non-Platonic interpretation of Hegel also appears in *Principles of Criticism*, where it is stated: "In fine arts,

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imagination, according to what kind of beauty lies before it, creates forms to represent ideas." The interpretation of Hegel through Plato and Neoplatonism reveals the tendency of Romanian culture to assimilate Hegelian thought without escaping the limits of the Platonic cosmological model, which held sway over it during the age of the 1848 revolution.

A précis of aesthetics, his *Principles of Criticism* clearly does not show a very rigorous way of thinking, because the author constantly conflates two notions which would have normally required distinction (the "principles of art" and "principles of criticism"), thus always shifting from criticism to its subject. But what is interesting is the view of later critics, related in meaning to that of the English term "criticism", that unifies history, criticism and art theory through the two methods with which it scrutinizes its subject: the historical method (which would lead, by analyzing historical types, to "establishing a set of absolute principles in any art"), and the theoretical method, that "deduces" principles from the "idea of beauty."

Fusing Hegel with Plato, Ionescu is searching for principles at the intersection of history with the absolute of the idea. What gives originality to this system of thought is its author's great confidence in the value of criticism. While equated with the free development of human reason, criticism plays for Ionescu the role that poetry played, for Cezar Bolliac (and for the Romantic thinkers) in the evolution of humanity: "Criticism is the highest form of reason, and it proves intellectual freedom"; it "must have an ideal that is above all things which exist" and "toward which it raises and against which it measures the production of the human genius," having to "rise itself to absolute principles." Identified with the principle of self-knowledge ("know thyself") and with thought in general, criticism becomes, in a fine comment to Descartes ("I think, therefore I am"), the guarantee of existence (in the words of Descartes, "humankind searches for itself, feels for itself").

Radu Ionescu differentiates two critical methods, charged with the task of finding the principles underlying any artistic creation: the historical method, based on analysis, and which "by studying the rules of masterpieces lays down absolute principles in any art," and another method, which reaches the idea of beauty by deriving its principles from there. But the best method is the one that unites the other two: "The true superior criticism is that which, in addition to the dedicated study of various artistic works, and in addition to developing the taste needed to appraise them, would also join them with philosophical thought, in order to look into the principles of art and understand beauty in itself." Study, taste, philosophy - these are the basic elements of superior criticism. In a word, criticism paves the way for civilization; the degree of civilization of a nation can be seen in the way it encourages the development of arts and letters.

Although he envisaged a synthesis between the historical and aesthetic methods to achieve the true superior criticism, R. Ionescu's article is overly theoretical. The difference between him and Maiorescu consists precisely in the fact that the latter grounds his statements in examples, and also in the fact that along with theoretical notions Maiorescu introduces a kind of criticism that is applied to contemporaneous Romanian poetry. While Maiorescu enforces a conduct, a program, Radu Ionescu has none.

Through the value he assigned to criticism Radu Ionescu is indeed a forerunner of Maiorescu and a theoretician whose thought defines the development of Romanian spirituality, even if in practice his criticism is modest, mainly summarizing, especially afflicted by the hollow rhetoric of his long-winded sentences.

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As to his views on the novel - *Don Juanii de Bucureşti (The Don Juans of Bucharest)* -, after Heliade had repudiated the novel R. Ionescu considered it as a defining work for that age. Beauty does not disappear, but shows itself under different forms: "The novel can tell us all, can describe all." Also, here appears the idea of the *empty forms* - the (political, social and cultural) forms that were imported, but that, since they have no roots here, cannot work well.

The view that now takes shape in Romanian criticism is that the work of art is not created as the author pleases, but according to certain rules, and that it progresses as humanity tends toward perfection. These discussions have further helped to clarify the notion of *national literature* and that of *artistic work*. Originality is a fundamental requirement of artistic value. By understanding the contemporary flow of ideas, the first Romanian theoreticians established here the classical principles on which artistic works are founded, adding to these local Romantic elements. Criticism becomes a means of selection and enforcement of values. The studies of R. Ionescu will try to prove that the purpose of the artistic work is to reveal and nurture the idea of beauty, while that of criticism is to contribute to its understanding and advancement. The definitive synthesis of the era would be later elaborated by T. Maiorescu.

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