II. DESTINÉES EUROPÉENNES

THE SECOND SHOUT: FĂNUȘ NEAGU AND HIS CLASSICIZATION. ON *ÎN VĂPAIA LUNII* (1971) THROUGH THE EYES OF LITERARY CRITICISM[1]

Lucian CHIȘU
Institutul „G. Călinescu" al Academiei Române
lucianchisu@gmail.com

Abstract

The present article is concerned with the critical reception of the volume *În văpaia lunii* (1971), which was not expected to arouse major interest since it comprised a selection of texts that have been previously published, a practice often called „reheating the soup' among specialists. However, *În văpaia lunii* represents a favourable moment in the writer's work and biography, which is why the author of the present article (incidentally) considered it to be the critics' "second shout" - with a symbolic reference to the novel *Îngerul a strigat* (*The Angel has shouted* – transl. mine). Even though not fully favourable, the first "shout" was more than profitable for the young writer whose first volumes had sparked intense controversies. Fănuș Neagu had gained a capital of sympathy, unusual for those times. Despite the differences of opinion entertained by the cultural media, the incisive author had succeeded in creating a favourable "image" for himself and in maintaining a good relationship with all his critics, since beyond reproaches they could not ignore the freshness and the originality of his style.

The second "shout" coincided with the publishing of the anthology *În văpaia lunii* (1971) and reached its climax in a several years, when the short stories

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collection *Pierdut în Balcania* (1982) was published and when the author reached his 50 years of life. The episode diminished by the end of 1989.

Al last, pursuing the symbolism deriving from the novel *Îngerul a strigat* (1968), a third "shout" could be considered as the one that emerged in the period after 1989. Old "treatments" in form of unfounded and discriminatory insults – the writer was placed on the list of "the expired ones"[1] - were (re)brought to the fore. All these reproaches were coming both from the "young wolves" and from other older ones whose habits hardly died. Therefore, it can be sadly concluded that during the writer's third biographical period Fănuș Neagu's work has been distorted by a mirror held by some critics whose actions were generated … by request. The present article is strictly concerned with the second "shout".

Key-words: *În văpaia lunii*, 1971, anthology, ideological thaw, Nicolae Balotă, Fănuș Neagu, classicization, critical reception, reorientation.

The publishing of the anthology *În văpaia lunii* (Minerva Publishing House, "Biblioteca pentru toți" collection, 1971) represents one of the most important events in Fănuș Neagu's biography. The above mentioned collection was exclusively dedicated to writers who already belonged to the national literary patrimony. Therefore, being published in such a collection can be assimilated to the author's "classicization", since both his short stories and his masterpiece novel *Îngerul a strigat* (1968)[2] became parts of the curriculum for lower and upper secondary education. Due to the ideological relaxation produced by the phenomenon called "the cultural thaw", that period of time made possible the re-acknowledgement of the autonomy of the aesthetic and the freeing of literature from the weight of imposed topics.

In the context of the previous considerations, the preface signed by Nicolae Balotă takes on a particular significance. As a critical accompanying statement, it proposed an authentic (exegetic) reorientation within the work itself, all the more useful, given that all the short stories in this anthology had been already published, and are therefore associated with a past time, not being able to offer anything new. Yet, this very detail highlighted the aesthetic value of Fănuș Neagu's work, which due to its strength succeeded in

[1] The writer's reply in this case is less known, though memorable: "Better being expired than… not ever born".
[2] *Îngerul a strigat* (1969) received The Prize of Writers Union in 1969.

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overshadowing the heavy heritage of imposed topics, some of them handling topics related to the socialist realism.

The anthology prefaced by Nicolae Balotă has the merit of opening the second of the three episodes that made up the critical reception of the literary work of this very productive writer. In fact, the critic himself had predicted it in a previous article, *Un spațiu imaginar* (An imaginary Space, transl. mine) published in the literary magazine „România literară", III (1970), no. 15/ April 9, p. 8, which contained the preface[3] *in nuce*. The idea of the imaginary space was borrowed from this article and developed to such an extent that it took the form of a vast and profound study on the writer's work. Its importance resides in its distancing from the earlier critical approaches and in the major change of "tone". This preface displays influences of the French "new criticism" represented by the well-known Lacan, Doubrowsky, Barthes, and especially Gaston Bachelard, who has been proposing a theory of imagination based on the four fundamental elements: fire, water, air, and earth. Nicolae Balotă's advanced critical vision on Fănuș Neagu's work has also been embraced by other scholars who had chosen the use of modern instruments in their investigations. This may also be a reason why Fănuș Neagu's work accompanied by Nicolae Balotă's preface became highly visible on the literary radars of the year 1971.

As previously mentioned, the consequences of publishing the volume in the *Biblioteca pentu toți* collection coincided with the classicization of the author, a fact which did not escape the attention of the important critics of the time. Two of them were the (then) young Mircea Iorgulescu and Mihai Ungheanu. The former saluted Fănuș Neagu's presence in the portfolio of the prestigious publishing house as a sign of breaking the walls of indifference displayed by editors at Minerva Publishing House towards their young writers:

„*Editorial policies have an important significance with regard to the affirmation of the national literature and we are pleased to acknowledge Fănuș Neagu's book being published as part of this collection of renowned authority as*

[3] It must be mentioned that, in the article we refer to, Nicolae Balotă made some short remarks with regard to the novel Îngerul a strigat. The article has been published in the literary magazine „Familia", V (1969), no. 1 (Jan.), p. 3, only nine months before. The similarities between the two texts could derive from the fact that the first one was still very recent in his memory.

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the beginning of a decisive orientation towards the authentic values of the Romanian contemporary literary scene." (translation mine). The latter put the finger on it and used the word classicization in his review: "There are of course various stages for appreciating a writer and the use of this word shows exactly that. [...] Classicization is one of the stages. In other words, the writers' admittance into textbooks and their being studied in schools as recommended and exemplary writers. [...]. One of the stages of appreciation is the Biblioteca pentru toţi collection, whose program and tradition ensured an undisputable prestige among readers."

Since Nicolae Balotă's *Preface* is an essential reference point, the summarizing of its twenty pages seems highly necessary. Some of the new ideas that permeated the critical reception of F. Neagu's work in 1971 will be listed below, with the help of quotations (translated from Romanian). Affiliations:

"*It would be interesting to study the horizon and the coordinates of this space, and to follow the itineraries of wanderers through the imaginary fields of the Lower Danube, through the tormenting areas of swamps … that crushed destinies, starting from Alexandru Odobescu, over Panait Istrati, to Fănuş Neagu. […] Such sequences from the narrative content of Fănuş Neagu's work remind of the cultic gestures included in V. Voiculescu's short stories. But the narrator reveals himself totally within the projections of these magical acts*." […]

In *Masa cu oglinzi*, a short story written by Ștefan Bănulescu, a town in Bărăgan that «cannot be seen, cannot be heard» ... suddenly, after «a few steps in the right direction» gets totally revealed. In this space everything shows or disappears suddenly. In Fănuș Neagu's *Vară buimacă*, the night falls all of a sudden «and in the same moment the endless field disappeared ... »".

Space and Time:

"*Within the writer's imaginary universe, a space of hiding places, weird apparitions, and various avatars of water corresponds to a time that flows slowly as a winding plain river. A time of fruit-bearing as well as of crawling corruption, a time that allows for anything. [...] Beyond the time as a cradle*

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of tolerance there is nevertheless an inexorable and blood-thirsty power which can destroy everything by means of crime".

Characters:

"*There are no tragic heroes, although catastrophes abound, there are in exchange lots of victims. A pathetic universe par excellence. Fănuş Neagu perfectly sensed the mysterious pathos of a humanity living under a ruthless zodiacal sign and lacking the energy to rebel. ... Such a consciousness does not necessarily imply passivity or sluggishness, but rather a certain frenzy. [...] The man is being reduced to the elementary within the space of Fănuş Neagu's fiction. [...] Nevertheless the world here is not primitive – as some commentators of this prose have said – but rather an archaic one. An ageing humanity, yet not tired, living among old things [...] Men, even as tyrants in their own families, are usually being dominated by women. [...] In this imaginary universe, violence itself is a question of fate. [...] Violence is opposed by a fresh candour*".

Senses, Sensations, Pulses:

"*A frenzy of senses, first of all. Freed (or never enchained) by a moral law, the existence goes on amongst sensory temptations and repulsions. The odours are sharp and penetrating, the sensual pleasures sought by the senses are always excessive' [...] Everything within this imaginary space bear secrets. And the birth itself is the secret of all secrets*".

Tutelary Deities:

"*Archaic under-earth deities are the true local divinities of the imaginary space of this writer. [...] The history has permeated the village life, while the ahistorical (rites, mythic archetypes, symbols, beliefs, traditions etc.) is in agony. The writer finely discerned the epical significance of the modification of structures, of the crisis of the archaic Village. [...]*".

Language: Such a universe of secrets uses a gnomic and sententious language of proverbs and sayings expressing archaic experiences, an Order which is completed, yet carried on by words [...] Beyond being a gifted

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narrator, beyond the refined linguistic pallet, another special virtue of Fănuş Neagu's in my opinion is his most authentic thirst for the truth. The novelist is seeking the truth (or maybe justice) for every being he writes about. Even for the very last foal struck in the head".

Before being reviewd by critics, the anthology had been announced by a signalling note published in the literary magazine „România literară":

"*The publishing of Fănuş Neagu's substantial volume of selections (under the title În văpaia lunii) in the Biblioteca pentru toţi collection represents a significant acknowledgement; it is for the first time indeed that a representative of the younger generation is being published in a prestigious and popular collection. We appreciate this initiative and, in the case of Fănuş Neagu, we find it totally justifiable. The 400 pages of the volume display an impressive number of completed texts of this exceptional prose writer and creator of such an original universe, but also of a concentrated and rigorously refined language*".

Following this short note, the first one who would sign a review of the anthology was Mircea Iorgulescu. Supporting Nicolae Balotă's Preface, the critic generally expressed the same ideas, but in his own words full of nuances:

"*The geography in which the writer places his characters is a natural extension of their being, a compulsory necessary frame [...] His short stories, lyrical in their essence, extract their lifeblood from investigating the essence of a very old and unique soul matter, which lasted in this part of the world ... [...] The multitude of Fănuş Neagu's characters can be essentially reduced to two or three types, which are identifiable in the innumerable instances in which they are present in many works, including the novel Îngerul a strigat, in which Che Andrei, for example, is a new variant for Papa Leon, the broke Iova or Alf from the other stories.[...] In Fănuş Neagu's prose writings the smells and the tactile sensations lost their original function and become rare and sparkly ornaments; [...] Ardent passion, exaltation, frenetic vitality, obeying very old life rituals, communion with the universe, resistance to predicament ... are qualities of the Romanian spirit suggested by individual*

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projections. [...] A visionary with profound intuition and an artist capable of great performances, Fănuș Neagu is today one of Romania's most important prose writers".

Mihai Ungheanu stayed very close to Nicolae Balotă's Preface, even closer than Mircea Iorgulescu. His text, from which we will reproduce a few passages, is in fact a review of Nicolae Balotă's *Preface,* and not of the volume itself, which is barely mentioned:

"*The wonderful accompaniment of Fănuş Neagu's short stories by the excellent critical review of Nicolae Balotă is as more welcomed in a book presenting the author draped in the vestment of consecration as his literature was not till long ago exclusively seen as being merely picturesque. The novelty brought by Nicolae Balotă's text derives from the grasping of the universe comprised in the stories and its complete comprehension. Unfortunately, the writer's first critics could not overcome the difficulty of understanding an unusual and fragmentary universe. [...] Nicolae Balotă's critical skills and intuition reveals Fănuş Neagu not as an annex-writer or an epigone of old trends, but as the possessor of his own and unique universe. [...] The space is not primitive and picturesque, as it has been previously said, but archaic. [...] The modern touch emphasized by the critic is the passionate depiction of the paroxysm that anticipates and accompanies the end of a world. From Nicolae Balota's perspective, Fănuş Neagu would be the celebrator of an end, and this attitude brings him closer to his own characters, who distinguished themselves especially by the frenzy with which they live their near end*".

The third in the series of critics who reviewed this volume was Nicolae Manolescu, who wrote a text published by the *Contemporanul* literary magazine. His reviewing is very unique and it can be considered as a show of personality, since its pretext is what others have already written about Fănuș Neagu. Consistent with himself, Nicolae Manolescu brought forward arguments and opinions that have been previously expressed, wrapped and then again unfolded, in a very particular manner. When appreciating the elements

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of novelty in Nicolae Balotă's *Preface*, elements that M. Iorgulescu and Mihai Ungheanu enthusiastically mentioned, N. Manolescu seems just as excited:

"*The discussion becomes the more interesting as the voice of Nicolae Balotă rises up in the defence of the stories: his preface is an exhaustive and subtle analysis and, furthermore, rich in original references. Few authors had the luck of being so understandingly commented upon". Nevertheless, this captatio benevolentiae is nothing else but a "poisoned gift" in which three of the written words bear the role of annulling any praise. These are: the defence (presumably carried out by Nicolae Balotă with regard to these stories, which would make them thus amenable), rises up (indicating a rather vehement attitude) and understandingly, which here also means "kindly*".

What follows is a lacework of ideas, that are cleverly – some of them even paradoxically – presented by an expert in firstly agreeing with himself and only afterwards with the others, given the fact that N. Manolescu's arguments are clearly not exactly new:

"*Fănuş Neagu is undoubtedly one of the most talented prose writers of the generation reaching now its forty years of life; but also one of the less prudent ones. One can rarely find a writer more wasteful of his gifts than the author of these almost thirty stories recently gathered under the title of the most facile of them. They are in fact nearly everything that Fănuş Neagu wrote till Îngerul a strigat. [...] His short stories are the work of a poet who possesses, as no one else does, the instinct of life in its most pure and fascinating forms, at the level where biological fatalness and destiny still get confused, the level of passions which unleash themselves and get consumed, of sensorial violence, where the fusion between man and nature is openly expressed. [...] Still, what remains between those two extremes? …The violence, the cruelty, the love and the hate have a biological character, rather than a moral one. They define a nature rather than a consciousness. [...] It becomes very difficult when the author's quality of a poet must tackle the demands of a prose text: plot, psychology etc… Beyond those pages filled with a specific atmosphere, or those evoking basic passions and uncomplicated souls,*

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beyond the plastic ability of language, Fănuş Neagu's stories rest upon apparently naïve topics".

Ilie Constantin is another critic who expressed dissatisfaction, or rather difficulties of understanding, which he directly addressed not necessarily to the author, but rather to the editor: "At the end of this massive retrospective volume, which includes the majority of the stories written by Fănuş Neagu, one of the observations (of less importance, of course) could be the one regarding the choosing of the volume title. [...] As a true writer, whose name immediately comes to mind when discussing the present day literature, Fănuş Neagu does not have one single story among his twenty-eight of the volume În văpaia lunii which could be considered as a total failure. [...] We will say it to the end: these stories can be judged with severity only with regard to the others, which in their turn and together with *Îngerul a strigat* comprise one of the most important work of the Romanian contemporary literary life.

An attempt to establish the literary coordinates for positioning Fănuș Neagu's work is also easily noticeable in the case of Alex. Ștefănescu:

"*The short stories recently published in Biblioteca pentru toţi collection of the Minerva Publishing House provide the public with the spectacle of an evolution capitalized by the novel Îngerul a strigat. [...] The characters evoked by Fănuş Neagu rarely represent a philosophy, and when the case, the philosophy is basic. ... The writer does not analyse necessity, but rather depicts an incident, being more attracted to the picturesque rather than the essential. [...] Fănuş Neagu's characters are predictable in every moment, but not predictable in perspective. The incident is the one that decides their fate. [...] Within the context of contemporary literature, these writings in prose are the continuation of a fertile tradition represented, among others, by Zaharia Stancu and Ştefan Bănulescu*".

The same approach has Liviu Leonte:

"*Intensely lyric, placed at its beginnings in the geographic and ethnographic area situated in the Danube Plain. The recent contributions of*

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Fănuş Neagu's prose writings detached themselves from the rigours of an almost unchangeable environment, offering thus an image of a remarkable structural and typological unity ... The characters feel the need to spend their energetic surplus which never fades by vehemently opposing the obstacles that are in their way. They are often in mourning, since fatalness seems to always reverse any of their good intentions and aspirations towards purity. [...] A powerful nature, full of tensions, accompanies their turmoil, in a kind of parallelism with multiple symbolic traits. [...] Stylistically speaking, Fănuş Neagu's writing is endangered not by depersonalized narratives that the author has abandoned, but by the opposed tendency towards literary excess in form of hyper-stylistic side-slipping to Gongorism".

Although specialized in literary history, Fănuș Băilești**e**anu attached the Preface to another source, adding though the correct information regarding its being capitalized in a book:

"*... The volume has a good preface signed by Nicolae Balotă – partly published both in the literary magazine "Luceafărul" and in the volume Labirint – which proposed a new concept for the critical analysis of the author: the confusion, and succeed in outlining the spiritual geography of Fănuș Neagu's creation*".

Ov. Ghidirmic brought a series of amendments in his study which in fact was a preparation for a later analysis of the deep structure of another anthology written by Fănuș Neagu (Fântâna, 1974). As precursors of the author, the critic named Const. Sandu Aldea, a writer also coming from the same region, Brăila, who constructed his stories using characters and topics deriving from the narratives of the Bărăgan and the Danube Plain:

"*Before integrating Fănuș Neagu in the illustrious line of authors represented by Panait Istrati and Sadoveanu, a procedure that has already been abundantly made, yet with no differentiation, it must be mentioned that the writer is a descendant – via the author of Chira Chiralina – of the writer C. Sandu-Aldea, who as a representative of the literary style called Sămănătorism was the first to introduce in the literature the region of the*

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Lower Danube and the swamps of Brăila, with the horse thieves (presented as almost innocent brigands of Wallachia, since the admiration for beauty prevails over the guilt as such), with passionate conflicts and songs, and with sanguine, passionate, violent and epicurean characters. [...] The writer mastered right from his very first stories the shocking, almost brutal metaphors, in accordance with the state of mind of the people: [...] Just as Sadoveanu – keeping it in perspective, though – Fănuș Neagu is a «handicraftsman», an engraver of the beautiful and refined sentence in many of his first stories. [...] The writer excelled in creating characters of «candour» and ingenuity which is always associated with «violence». [...] As far as his method is concerned, the writer oscillates between «romanticism» and «magic realism»".

Yet, in our opinion, the greatest achievement of the critical reception regarding the anthology *În văpaia lunii* (1971) is represented by an aspect on which we did not concentrate up to this point. It regards the references made to Fănuș Neagu's stories for children (also included in the anthology in question), which have been bypassed by critics at the moment of their being published. The same did not happen in the case of his volumes of short stories, which benefited sufficiently from the critics' attention, even when they have been gathered into anthologies. Children's literature is still seen as a minor genre of our literature, not to mention the confusion made between it and the literature studied in schools, which selects or adapts various texts, which according to mostly pedagogical but also artistic criteria are considered as appropriate to be included in the handbooks for *Romanian Language and Literature*. Only in *În văpaia lunii* the critical remarks made with regard to some of these stories (for children) include actual, though belated, elements of a real critical reception. Despite this major drawback, the artistic value of the children's stories written by Fănuș Neagu reaches the highest standards (Creangă, Ionel Teodoreanu, Marin Sorescu, Ana Blandiana).

The decision itself to write literature for children shows the non-conformism of his life and work. In a questionnaire-survey called *Prose*

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Writers on Critic and Prose, published in „Gazeta literară”[4] (1961), five questions have been addressed with regard to: (1) the role of literary criticism; (2) its forms of manifestation in “supporting” the authors; (3) the importance of gathering experience in order to comprehend life, “as the ultimate purpose of writers”; (4) the attitude of our prose writers towards “the mission to reflect the socialist actuality” and (5) “the most remarkable works of the genre published during the last three years” (1959-1961).

One of the writers being questioned was Fănuș Neagu. The young prose writer did not answer questions 3 and 4 (the ones regarding the writer’s engagement and the prerogatives of socialist realism), while for the last question he intentionally changed the direction by not naming the most remarkable books of the last three years, commenting instead, by ricochet, upon the poorest ones:

“*One of the poorest book, even if it was published in 1958, is* ***Cartea cu ochi albaștri****, by Octav Pancu-Iași, because it discusses the psychology of children and of teenagers in a very distorting way. Those who are writing for the children bear a great responsibility regarding their education, their formation as a young generation – and therefore one should be alarmed by any poor book being published in the field.* It would have been appropriate in this case for the critics to adopt a stronger and keener attitude when exposing the faults of the book”.

This was the origin of his decision to write stories for children.

Conclusions

The images focalised by the critics’ telescope have been here succinctly presented. The publishing of the volume in a prestigious collection corresponds, as already mentioned, with the author’s classicization, an event

[4] „Gazeta literară”, VIII (1961), no. 47 /Nov. 16, p. 3; Gazeta literară”, VIII (1961), no. 48 / Nov. 23, p. 2. (The interviewees were: Eusebiu Camilar, Domokoș Géza, Al. I Ghilia, Dumitru Ignea, Fănuș Neagu, Șerban Nedelcu, Pop Simion, Ion Marin Sadoveanu, Mircea Șerbănescu, Nicolae Velea (November 16) Eugen Barbu, Ury Benador, Vladimir Colin, Radu Cosașu, Remus Luca, Vasile Nicorovici, Titus Popovici, Szemlér Ferenc, Ieronim Șerbu, Al. I. Ștefănescu, Nicolae Țic, Petru Vintilă).

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which in Fănuș Neagu's biography represents a new step in being acknowledged as an artist. The critical reviews of his work display in addition a new habit deriving from the fact that these texts in prose abounded in unusual thematic approaches, characters almost always confused and in a new and expressive language. Thus, the critics began to consider Fănuș Neagu's creation as a "universe", a word whose etymology indicates a one-dimensional expansion. Even when the subject of the critics is an autonomous one, the majority of the literary chroniclers discuss not only that, but the "*fănușian* universe/style", thus involving other productions. A great deal of articles written over the years on Fănuș Neagu's work bear witness for the critics' need to engage discussions about the older short stories that have already been published in volumes, in order to integrate them into the atmosphere of the new ones. Even when mentioned, what was "new" became even harder to be highlighted, since it was diverted by the oxymoronic attraction (an oxymoron is a paradox before being a figure of style) exerted by a style considered to be mannerist up to its fusion with the baroque, while within its narrative nothing becomes repetitive, but in turn full of an extraordinary originality. Between the pattern of this reduplicative model and the "inner form" of expression a continuing tension is being born, out of which style is generated. Over the time, this style (a cohabitation between mannerism and the high artistic language), enthusiastically welcomed for a few decades, began tiring out some of the chroniclers, but not the author himself, who seemed to continually employ it.

The result, which could be summarized as an aesthetic form of kalokagathon - although calofilia would have been preferable as a term, if it would not have been "attributed" to religious patristic literature – and which was the writer's inborn quality has extremely influenced those who analysed his work. Literary criticism itself (through some of its representatives) started to write about his creation in a manner that was proper for the author in question, using series of metaphors to explain its internal significations. Since syllogism was hard to be applied as norm in the prose of atmosphere, some of the critics used the synonymy of ideas, symbolically displayed by the speech acts present in the written texts. Making use of the metaphor, critics

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started to translate Fănuș Neagu's artistic language into … Romanian (an artistic language itself). This approach indicates a form of fascination/seduction in front of the author's pleadings materialized over the years in the columns he had in literary magazines (Mult e dulce și frumoasă, Acasă), in the series of volumes of sports journalism (in which Arghezi's urge to explore the "obscure" areas of the language- see *Testament* - becomes visible), or in Insomnii de mătase. All of these gathered followers and created a real cult for the expressiveness of our mother tongue, of the "beauty without body", as Eminescu once said.

The exemplifications with a generalizing value are even more present as his first novels were being published (*Îngerul a strigat* and *Frumoșii nebuni și marilor orașe*). Although these are long and complex writings, they have often been associated with commentaries on the short stories. A specific phrase - "the *fănușian* refined linguistic palace" - occurs insistently in the reviews being published in this period. Although the phrase had been coined by Nicolae Balotă, de facto it manifested itself from the first to the last of Fănuș Neagu's books.

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