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MODERN POETRY AND CRISIS

Romulus BUCUR[1]

Abstract: *Part from a book in progress, the present paper aims at clarifying the notion of* modern poetry*, by making use of the concepts of Eleatism and Heraclitism, analyzed in Western culture by Anton Dumitriu, and applied, under the names of* Classical *and* Romantic*, to the study of literature, by G. Călinescu. Furthermore, the notion of* crisis*, fundamental to the understanding of the modern age, is examined through a series of examples, with the aim of getting a better approximation of the concept of* modern poetry.

Key words: *Modern poetry, Eleatism, Heraclitism, crisis.*

There is a corpus of texts, of variable dimensions – according to one's personal esthetical, ideological, theoretical options, preferences a. s. o. – constructed throughout about one and a half century (let's say, as temporal landmarks, with all arbitrariness such an operation entails, between 1846, when Poe publishes his *Philosophy of Composition*, and 1950, when, in the same American space, Charles Olson issues his *Projective Verse*), and which we agree to call *modern poetry*.

Such a phrase is highly arguable, in the first place because there is no agreement (and, supposedly, there won't be one) on the meaning of the first term. As regards the second, it appears as such, or with small variations as the title of books that have become obligatory references in the field, or, if not present in the title, it represents nevertheless the main topic of the respective works – (M. Călinescu, 1970), (M. Călinescu, 1995), (Crăciun, 2002), (Friedrich, 1969), (Hristić, 1972), (Muşina, 1997), (Raymond, 1972).

Prior to examining the common note of these works, a precision is in order: in our opinion, there are two main approaches to the material to be studied, namely, the typological and the historical one, described (although not named as such, but, respectively, 'classical' and 'romantic'), in Romanian culture, in a famous essay (G. Călinescu, 1965), and which, in fact, correspond to the two dominant spiritual paradigms in Western culture, the Eleatic / Parmenidean, and the Heraclitean one, as described in (Dumitriu, 1986).

From the typological point of view, with which we confess a greater affinity, the *modern* belongs to the category of *romantic*, such as defined in (G. Călinescu, 1965), both being "universal *types* [emphasis added], taken out of the historical contingencies" (24). From its characteristic features, we quote a few: "The classic, showing interest in eternal types, has a characterological world-view.

[1] *Transilvania* University of Braşov.

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The romantic comes with a historical interest" (21); "Temporally, the classic lies in an eternal present, is an *Eleatic* [emphasis added]; the romantic situates himself in the perspective of an indefinite past, he is a *Heraclitian* [emphasis added]" (22)[i]; "The classic 'imitates' models. The romantic 'invents'" (24); "The classic is applying 'rules', is 'preceptistic'. The romantic is independent, revolutionary" (24). Otherwise, as a possible argument for using these terms, Hugo Friedrich labels modern poetry as "deromanticized romanticism" (Friedrich, 26); Matei Călinescu speaks about "esthetical modernity disguised as 'romanticism'" (16), Jovan Hristić, speaking of romanticism, considers it as "having been, and having remained as the great 'preface to modern literature'" (117), while John Bayley considers the romantic movement to have returned from France under the guise of Symbolism (49)[ii].

It is legitimate to ask the question whether we have paradigms, in the meaning from the philosophy of science, as defined by Kuhn, and which served as a starting hypothesis for (Muşina, 1997), that is

> research firmly based upon one or more past scientific achievements, achievements that some particular scientific community acknowledges for a time as supplying the foundation for its further practice (Kuhn, 10),

to which two more features are added:

> Their achievement was sufficiently unprecedented to attract an enduring group of adherents away from competing modes of scientific activity. Simultaneously, it was sufficiently open-ended to leave all sorts of problems for the redefined group of practitioners to resolve (Kuhn, 1970, 10),

or to accept Corbea's observation, commenting Jauss, that

> "in counter distinction to the first ones [science paradigms, our note, R.B.], where obsolete *paradigms* are simply eliminated, the practice of criticism tolerates them further, in a latent and after all parasitic cohabitation" (Corbea, 148).

Dividing the history of poetry (an operation already supposing a certain conceptual commitment) into two parts, a premodern poetry, and a modern one, we actually introduce order into facts, systematize history by categories.

Such an operation is Jauss' analysis of H. O. Burger, who asked the questions whether Friedrich simplified just this identity of premodern poetry, and whether a certain structural identity between 'modern' and 'classical' poetry exists – quoted in (Jauss, 339-340). By carefully examining, within the respective horizons of expectations a sample of poetry representative of each moment, namely, Théophile de Viau's *Ode III*, and Baudelaire's *Le Cygne*, "in which the postulated structural unity should reveal itself, in spite of all stylistic differences" (341). The final result was the confirmation of Friedrich's thesis (375).

Also, if we refuse (with all due nuances, of course) the historical approach, then it would be honest to admit that the 'eternal' types we are speaking about have been constructed in time, that is nonsensical to speak about history without typology and reciprocally, about typology in the absence of a historical dimension; actually, they contain and generate each other, such as the *yin* and *yang* in the famous *taiji* diagram.

A series of authors, generally coming from the field of science, bring arguments to such a position. For instance, physicist Niels Bohr notices the concentric assault on the principle of *causality*, to which it contraposes that of *complementarity* (Bohr, 40), C. G. Jung, after noticing that "The axioms of causality are being shaken to

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their foundation" (xxii), introduces the concept of *sincronicity* (xxiv), and F. Capra proposes the replacement of the *yang* paradigm of Western culture with a *yin* one, more adequate to today's scientific circumstances (Capra, 1995).

In Romanian culture, and in the field of humanities, a similar position is that of Ioana Em. Petrescu, who, examining the changes in the paradigm of 20th century science, speaks about a mutation consisting in "abandoning the anthropocentric and individualistic cultural model elaborated during the Renaissance, as well as of the classic concept of scientific" (160).

From literary theorist R. Wellek, we take the concept of *literary epoch* (or *period*) (Wellek and Warren, 350), (Wellek, 413); speaking about the concept of *symbolism*, he actually refers to modern poetry. After describing what could be named *modernism* (Wellek, 432-439), he states the disadvantages of the term, that is, the possibility of being valid to any form of contemporary art (Wellek, 411), and the difficulty of being distinguished from the avant-garde (Wellek, 412), he advocates the term of *symbolism*, defined in fact as modern poetry, originating in France between 1885-1914, and having produced major writers and poetry in other countries too (Wellek, 439), and reproaching Friedrich the lack of willingness to name symbolists the poets named and analyzed in *Die Struktur der Modernen Lyrik* (Wellek, 427).

What characterizes modernity is the notion of *crisis*, which occurs "whether we simply exclude old values, without finding a substitute; or, if the substitute ones are narrower than the previous values" (Dumitriu, 15 – author's italics), and is connected to the change in the perception of time – from the static, cyclic time of the Middle Ages, to the new time of Renaissance (M. Călinescu, 29) and of the split time of capitalism – the objective, measurable time of society, and the personal, subjective, imaginative time of the individual (17).

On the level of the artist's psychology, this contradiction lead to exaggerating up to a hardly tolerable degree the discrepancy between the total exigencies of the spirit, and the limited existence of human beings (Raymond, 62), poets having to fulfill a compensatory function (62), the final result being, after Hugo Friedrich, a period which can be best described by negative categories, which have lost their depreciative meaning, becoming descriptive, or even eulogistic (16).

For Paul Valéry, the crisis (of modernity) pertains to disorder, which, in Europe, consists of the *free coexistence, in all cultivated spirits, of different ideas, of life and knowledge principles totally opposite* (263) and by novelty becoming a quality in itself, *whose absence compromises everything, and whose presence substitutes anything else* (71-72).

Thus results a modern art, opposed to Great Art, who has a few qualities (complexity, irrational, sensations, *correspondences* – a few malicious allusions to the founding fathers of modern poetry can be sensed here) (77), and whose price is *intoxication* – one has to increase the dose or to change the drug (77); a few keywords, such as farther and farter *forward*, more and more *intense*, *bigger and bigger*, *faster and faster*, *newer and newer* (77) can also be seen as symptoms describing the crisis.

Yet another example, which could constitute a strong argument – Wolf von Aichelburg. His selection is not accidental: as a marginal poet in a marginal culture (at the time he wrote these texts, he was a German-language poet in Romania), he is a good example for both the dimensions and the multiple facets of the fundamental crisis modern poetry is built on.

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His starting point is somehow (at the extent these two terms do not overlap) double: Rilke and orphism. For the author, poetry (or, at least, this type of poetry) is eulogy; it also is "a state of transformation of the soul, a 'holy madness'" (von Aichelburg, 63); from the fact he does not comment upon this position, it could result he agrees with it. Another remark to be made is that Rilke is a *modern* poet, while orphism is a (very) old direction of poetry.

Also, it is a conception of eternal poetry, beyond any historical determination: "poets doubt eternity, doubt love, doubt God. But they never doubt the veracity of their own feeling, poetry itself" (63).

Can we draw the conclusion that this crisis means questioning (the foundation of) poetry, as a symptom of modernity? Possibly – the mentioning of Rimbaud (64) points in this direction. Elaborating, we have a crisis of modern world, a spiritual one "the decomposition of old society and religiosity" (64), whose consequences are *not* "the crisis we signaled", i. e., "a crisis of the destiny of poetry, independent in its essence by the general evolution of spirit" (64), and one of poetry, possibly equivalent to abandoning orphism.

Returning to this point, "crisis we are speaking about is not a deviation, but a crisis of the substance of poetry itself, and those concerned do not break up with tradition, like the experimentalists of modernism" (64); by *experimentalists of modernism* probably are meant the representatives of the avant-garde. As regards the metaphysical side, for the author, "art has a material side, craft, and a metaphysical side, its destiny. Experimentalists ignore the destiny of art. In the second instance, the conscience of destiny is hyper-lucid: it is this destiny that is put to test" (64).

Looking from the perspective of a semiotic theory of literature, we have a generalized crisis, for which this is just where it takes place: "the crisis of literature is a symptom of a crisis appeared somewhere else" (Corti, 19). More specifically literary is the decrease of the cohesion f the system, resulted from the "sliding of everything literary outside the verbal borders" (21).

In the context of his general conception about literature, Virgil Nemoianu proposes a radical, generalized definition of crisis, as represented, one way or another, by any human situation (16), and sketches a model which supposes crisis, its solution, engendering a new crisis, its solution, and so on (16).

From the esthetical point of view, for Ortega y Gasset, crisis, especially that of the 20th century, is represented by the dehumanization of art. Simplifying, his argument is founded on the idea that the major road of art is built on the 'will of style'. And, "to stylize, means to deform reality, to make it *unreal* [author's italics]" (330), and, further, "stylization entails dehumanization. And the reverse: there is no other manner of dehumanizing than stylization" (330), which implicitly, means a crisis of 'realism', of 'representation', of 'mimetic' art, leading in the end to the idea of the lack of transcendence of art (337). Herbert Read sees crisis as originating in the distinction between image and symbol (or illustration and interpretation. "fundamental to an understanding of the modern movement in art" (19)), seen as a decline in sensibility, to whose renewal, it seems, there are two possible solutions: (1), oriented backwards, the return in time of the artist, in the historical development of his art, and remaking contact with true tradition, and (2), oriented forward, a jump into the future, in a new and original state of sensibility, revolting against actual conditions, in order to create new ones, more adequate to contemporary consciousness (20). Matei Călinescu conceives a threefold crisis, towards

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tradition, towards the modernity of bourgeois civilization, and towards itself, at the extend it perceives itself as a new tradition or form of authority (21).

In a book which remembers, and not only by its title, that of Matei Călinescu (otherwise cited in the references section), *The Five Paradoxes of Modernity*, Antoine Compagnon starts from the remark of the existence of a modern tradition, which he considers an absurdity, because "it would entail a tradition made of breaches" (6), which is just another way of speaking about crisis.

Alexandru Muşina considers modern poetry under its exploratory dimension; it ceases to be "the description of what is intelligible, of what is already known", becoming "an exploration of new areas, both of human experience, and of expression" (39), in the end describing an again threefold crisis, of the *I*, of language, and of reality (68). For Hristić, we do not have anymore an explicit crisis, named as such, but, after phrasing, in terms quite close to those of Read, of the most interesting problem of the forms of modern literature, the "analysis of the rapports between the forms of art and the forms of perception" (50), and the presentation, entailing the notion of crisis, of these forms, whose peculiarity

> does not consist in interrupting the connection between the forms of perception and the forms of art, but in the fact that this connection is fundamentally different from the one we find in classical art (50).

Which belongs less to a dialectic of history, and moreover by its perception:

> Words such as 'center' and 'periphery' mean much less than it seems at first sight – actually, they mean nothing, because we do not believe anymore that the world can be ordered by the model of some perfect geometric forms, by whose beauty we always allow to be seduced (50)

or a possible optical illusion:

> from all that has been, we do not see but what is, at a certain moment, interesting and valuable for us too, and, provided that we choose facts accordingly, we will always be able to demonstrate any hypothesis about certain human activities which, at a certain moment, would have expressed, most fully and adequately, man's central concerns (42).

As seen from the examples above (mere samples from a much larger corpus), the notion of crisis is constitutive to modern age, and, as a consequence, to modern poetry. More, the last two quotations from Hristić are meant to throw a much-needed light of relativity upon the too heated modern-postmodern debate.

Notes

[i] See also (Dumitriu, 1986, 33). The book is an illustrative example for the consistency between modern age and Western culture and civilization, built on these very paradigms, in which the authors sees constitutive principles of cultures.

[ii] This last work is even more interesting, starting from the title, *The Romantic Survival*, because it assimilates romanticism and modern poetry; in the first part, there are discussed the main antinomies of modern poetry, its main crisis-generating tensions, while chronic crisis seems to be a defining note of modernity.

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