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JEWISH-ROMANIAN WRITERS: A CONVERGING OR A PARALLEL CANON?

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Abstract: *Starting from the discussions around the notion of canon in Romanian culture, especially since the translation of Harold Bloom's The Western Canon, the present paper examines the canonical status of a particular group of writers, that is, those who belong simultaneously to Romanian literature, and to the Romanian-speaking Jewish minority. It reviews the cases of two writers, Mihail Sebastian and N. Steinhardt, both from the point of view of their self-image, and of the reception of their work.*

Keywords: *canon, Jewish, inherited vs. acquired identity.*

How do Jewish / minority writers situate (themselves) towards the literature of the majority? There are a series of approaches of the issue, from various points of view: (Călinescu, 1983: 963-964, 791, 794, 796, and, especially, 973-976), (Crohmălniceanu, 2001), (Morar, 2006), the writers discussed being Ronetti-Roman, Felix Aderca, Mihail Sebastian, Max Blecher, I. Peltz, Ury Benador, Ion Călugăru, H. Bonciu, Tristan Tzara, B. Fundoianu, Ilarie Voronca, Gherasim Luca and Norman Manea, a special issue of the *Vatra* review etc.; it does not result a definite position of these writers with regard to the canon of Romanian literature: some are, rightfully, considered as marginal, others are validated individually, others are claimed also by the canon of the avant-garde, by that of French literature, by a transnational canon of the diaspora Jewish literature.

It must be said that, by *canon*, we understand the esthetic canon, such as revived and firmly stated in (Bloom, 1998), and refined, within the field of Romanian literary theory, by Mircea Martin (Martin, 1997-1998), (Martin, 2000a), (Martin, 2000b), (Martin, 2000c), (Martin, 2000d). Considering literature "in and for itself, beside any considerations foreign to its intimate nature and to literary life"1 (Martin, 2000b), and canonization taking place "exclusively within the literary field", a decisive part is played by literary critics, but also by "the writers, themselves, through their publicly asserted preferences and affinities" (Martin, 2000b).

We shall discuss two cases, symptomatic through the fact that, without trying to hide their ethnic origin, the respective authors explicitly set their references to Romanian culture, aiming at the canon of Romanian literature: Mihail Sebastian and N. Steinhardt. Which arises the question of the defining criterion of the Jewish-Romanian / Romanian-Jewish writer: is it the religious one, the linguistic one, that of undertaking certain cultural, in a broad

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sense, values, that of (self-) identification with a certain image?

There is a certain ambiguity in the canonical situation of our two writers — that between the esthetic / critical canon, and the school / academic one, which is "only *retrospective*", and "open to *heteronomic* aspects of culture" (Martin, 2000b); it remains to be seen to what extent the interest in Mihail Sebastian's and N. Steinhardt's works is a genuine one, or can be tied to formerly unpublished, or out of print (and taboo) works (Mihail Sebastian), or formerly taboo themes (N. Steinhardt). It is certain, though, that these works, published in the nineties, shed a new light on their work as a whole, asking for a re-evaluation.

As to what 'region' of the canon do our authors belong, we might mention the division between a corpus of "canonical literary texts", and one of "afferent critical comments" (Martin, 2000a), that is, a creative canon, and a critical and theoretical one, both being "the faces of the same esthetic canon, whose complex unity shouldn't be ever lost from view" (Martin, 2000b).

As regards the canonical situation of the two writers: Sebastian's target is the creative canon, without neglecting the critical one (through his reviews, essays, cultural journalism), while the bulk of Steinhardt's work consists of literary criticism, and cultural and religious essays and sermons. At no point was there any attempt to situate them in the canon *as Jews* — Sebastian's value as a writer is denied exactly because of his ethnic origin, and, when he explicitly approaches the theme of Judaism, he is violently attacked by both sides, xenophobic Romanians considering him an alien trying to infiltrate in the healthy body of the Romanian nation / culture, while Jews simply labeled him as a renegade; Steinhardt, after having tried, in his youth, to undertake his Jewish identity, writing two books about it, (Steinhardt & Neuman, 1935), and (Steinhardt & Neuman, 1937), after his religious conversion seems to try to conceal it.

In the case of Sebastian, his position in the inter-war literature isn't very clear — one cannot speak of obvious denial of his value (the possible exception, *De două mii de ani* [For Two Thousand Years] caused something very close to a character assassination, but all was due to the author's Jewish identity), but a discreet marginalization can always be invoked. The beginning might be considered the famous, in Romanian literature, G. Călinescu's, *Istoria literaturii române de la origini până în prezent*, where one can find judgments like "Artistic talent as a fiction writer seems to be missing, though", or "One can feel the lack of imagination" (Călinescu, 1983: 963), a trend continued by the exegesis — "their [of Sebastian's generation, R. B.] books have (with a few exceptions) a signification pertaining moreover to attitude, to a mentality different from the traditional one, than to esthetic achievement" (Grăsoiu, 1986: 155), while his fiction, "no doubt interesting, impressive through the pathos of the search for his own identity", does not succeed in "achieving the level of the great novel of the inter-war period" (Grăsoiu, 1986: 155). The situation seems to have slowly changed, to this contributing the reprinting of his long-silenced novel *De două mii de ani* [For Two Thousand Years], generally together with *Cum am devenit huligan* [How I Became a Hooligan], the pressbook of the scandal caused by the books, together with the author's responses, and especially the revelation of his *Diary*, published in 1996; also, the anniversary moment in 2007 seems to have added to the reevaluation: new monographs, press-inquiries, articles, conferences etc.

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There is, nonetheless, an exception: (Petreu, 2009), (Petreu, 2010), a book which tried to construct the image of an author totally indebted to his master, Nae Ionescu, and thus to the interwar far right. In the author's opinion, we have a "moderate far right extremist" Petreu, 2009: 126-127); although conscious of the aberrant term, she insists in using it (Petreu, 2009: 127). It is also worth mentioning that the book generated ample reactions, mostly negative, and which may constitute in themselves another book.

The volume *Mihail Sebastian. Dilemele identității* [Mihail Sebastian. The Dilemmas Of Identity], although published with a great delay after the international conference whose proceedings it publishes (Finkenthal, 2011), can also be viewed as an instance of the consolidating of Mihail Sebastian's canonic status, as well as the discovery of a few previously unpublished poems by him (Dinu, 2011), (Cernat, 2011); to the same conclusion lead a series of papers recently published by Ion Vartic – (Vartic, 2011a), (Vartic, 2011b), (Vartic, 2011c), (Vartic, 2011d).

Steinhardt's position was somehow similar — without speaking about marginalization (except, perhaps, by the authorities), he was known as an honorable critic and essayist, and, by a few connoisseurs, an as atypical Orthodox monk; the change of image came with the posthumous publication, in 1991, of his prison diary, *Jurnalul fericirii* [The Diary of Happiness], followed by the reprinting of his previous books, by the publishing of his sermons and religious essays, by two small monographs, (Ardeleanu, 2000), and (Mureşan, 2006), and by a lot of articles in the literary reviews, among which a dissonant voice, that of Alexandru Sever (Sever, 1997), who denies, on a moderate though firm, sometimes ironical tone, the author's moral right to religious conversion.

His canonic status, already good, has been enhanced by a recent book, originally a PhD thesis, (Ardeleanu, 2009), which examines thoroughly both his biography and his work.

It was formulated the hypothesis of "a certain, problematic too, Jewish (micro) specific in Romanian literature" (Cistelecan, 2000: 3). Developing it, in the same issue of the *Vatra* review, Leon Volovici, referring to Ion Vinea's inquiry published in 1935, in *Facla*, quotes I. Peltz, who considers himself "a Romanian writer — just a Romanian writer", and who does not hide his "Jewish origin. But this is something totally different" (Volovici, 2000: 14), or Ury Benador who, just like Sebastian, is preoccupied by "the intimate fusion of the Romanian element with the Jewish one" (Volovici, 2000: 15); an interesting nuance is brought by Al. Robot: "A Jew become writer brings along too, in a greater or smaller quantity, an ancestral contribution, but he can also represent, with dignity, the specific of the country to whose art takes part, and in whose language he expresses himself" (Volovici, 2000: 15).

In the case of the authors we are writing about, their option is clear too; there is a rather doubtful reference to knowing personally each other: in the *Resolution for Closing file # 9802*, Steinhardt is characterized as "a close co-worker of a series of writers (such as Mihail Sebastian, N. D. Cocea, G. Călinescu, Al. Rosetti) who were appreciative of his writings" (Cosmineanu & Moldovan, 2005: 123). Although hard to prove, they were frequenting the same circles, and had, through family / affective ties, affinities for the same places: "I'd like to know, for instance, what anti-Semitic law could annihilate in my being the irrevocable fact of having been born near the Danube and of loving this land" (Sebastian, 2003, 230), or, in a more succinct phrasing, "I will not

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cease to be, by that, a Jew, a Romanian, and a Danube man" (Sebastian, 2003, 229), and, "I met him in my first college days. He was, like Mihail Sebastian, a Danube man, yet not from Brăila, but from the smaller Oltenița. Brăila: an international port, Oltenița a wealthy borough" (Steinhardt, 1991, 118) — this is Steinhardt's account on his friend Manole or Em. Neuman, the co-author of his two books on Judaism). More: "He questions me whether I am a Romanian. I am, answer I. What, ain't you a Yid? My blood is Jewish, reply I, but for feeling and thinking, I think and I feel Romanian" (Steinhardt, 1991, 164), and, "My answer, paraphrasing Churchill, whose mother was American, and who used to declare I'm fifty percent American and hundred percent English, might have been: I'm hundred percent Jewish and thousand percent Romanian" (Steinhardt, 1991, 165).

In both cases, we are clearly facing a dialog between two identities: an inherited, Jewish, one, and an acquired, or more exactly, in the process of acquiring, Romanian one. A dialog which Mihail Sebastian wished harmonious, constructive, and which is, at every step, denied by reality, and which seems to have succeeded for N, Steinhardt at the cost of the probable occultation of his roots.

In the opinion of one of the most outstanding interpreters of Sebastian's work, Leon Volovici, also the editor of his *Diary*, "the writer the most preoccupied by Jewish identity", Mihail Sebastian, "sarcastically rejects the 'assimilist comedy', as he calls it, proposing one of the most profound meditations on the essence of Judaism, and the condition of being a Jew in modern Europe, and in Romania in particular" (Volovici, 2007, 3), the novel being interdependent with the image of the *island*, the theme of the author's last, unfinished play, and a recurring image in his work. This idea of solitude, of unregimentation, seen as the only possibility of existence for the critical spirit (Sebastian, 2003, 266), as opposed to the "uniformed man" (Sebastian, 2003, 267), does not represent anymore an option, at least, not for the writer. His freedom is the freedom of option, even when this option is impossible, or declared as such by the others.

Steinhardt's two books on Judaism are intertwined with a juicy (double) account of the religious adventures of the two friends, he and Manole; the *in extenso* version is to be found in *Jurnalul fericirii*, the abridged one, in a text called *Mărturisire* [Confession], a story which ends in giving up Judaic religious initiation, and, as known, culminates in the author's religious conversion, in prison, and, a while after getting out, with his becoming a monk.

The quest for identity in the case of the two authors can be followed in much more detail. Nevertheless, even from the present sketch, a drama of the dialog of the double identity can be seen, a drama which, assumed seriously and lucidly, can account for the actual change in their canonic status.

Notes

[1]Unless otherwise specified, the English translations from the works quoted in this paper belong to its author, Romulus Bucur.

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