Romanian Aesthetics "after" Tudor Vianu. A few Delimitations[1]

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After 1948, Romanian aesthetics is colonized by political dogma and reoriented towards the construction of Socialist Realism. The domain is reshaped at the beginning of the 50s. As the name itself suggests, "Marxist-Leninist aesthetics" is launched as a dominantly ideological discipline. Initially cut out of the syllabi, aesthetics "is gradually reintroduced in academic education from 1954 or, in other universities – such as Iaşi – only later, from 1960" (Smeu 2009: 239). Besides the shift in conception, its practitioners are also changed and former specialists established before the Second War – like Tudor Vianu, Al. Dima, V. Iancu, L. Rusu, P. Comarnescu, I. Biberi etc. – abruptly replaced by authors formed or, rather, utterly reformed by the new political partisanship. The older generation aestheticians now try to turn to comparative literature or literary history. Nowhere is this shift more poignant than in the case of Tudor Vianu, the formerly undisputed leader of the domain.

Indeed, the career of the author of the 1934–1936 *Estetica* goes through an obvious cesura: his last explicit works on aesthetics – *Transformările ideii de om*, *Figuri şi forme literare* – date back from 1946; although drafted in 1947, *Tezele unei filozofii a operei* would only be published in the 1966 volume of *Postume*. Vianu is completely absent from the so-called aesthetic debates of Socialist Realism, while on the other hand he becomes more involved in the domain of stylistics. In fact, his interwar works were largely prohibited during the 50s and it appears that new literary generations were less acquainted with the name of Vianu the aesthetician; a significant example is that, despite *Estetica* having been already published in three editions until 1945, Ion Ianoşi, who was studying in Leningrad at the beginning of the 50s and would later become a chief academic aesthetician, confesses of "not being then familiarized" (Ianoşi 2012: 316) with the fundamental

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works where Vianu deals with the topic of artistic specificity. Indeed, compared to the first generation of Socialist aestheticians – with names like Marcel Breazu, Nicolae Moraru, Ion Ianoşi, Andrei Băleanu, Ion Pascadi, Grigore Smeu, N. Tertulian, Pavel Câmpeanu etc., some of whom were merely dilettantes –, Tudor Vianu seems already set on a parallel trajectory. During these years, the professor struggles to build a distinct career in stylistics, comparative literature and literary history. Although a canonical reference only a decade before, Vianu's aesthetic studies are no longer involved in the new debates upon contemporary concepts (such as those of "reality", "content", "monumental", "typical" etc.)[2]. As a matter of fact, the very domain whose intellectual authority Vianu used to be until 1948 would vanish during the 50s. Of course, after the cultural liberalization of the 60s, aesthetics is reinstated, but in terms that would never equal the spectacular revival of literary criticism from the same years.

A harbinger of liberalization was the year 1963, when debates about the literary-critical heritage arise in some journals. One such article is written by aesthetician Liviu Rusu about Maiorescu, being followed by Tudor Vianu's intervention on the same topic – *Înţelegerea lui Maiorescu*, in the journal "Viaţa românească", no. 8. Both Rusu and Vianu argue for a "selective" recuperation of Maiorescu's intellectual legacy. At that point, Vianu could be considered Maiorescu's most authorized interpreter: the author of *Estetica* had written extensively on the *Junimea* leader's intellectual formation in the 1925 study "Maiorescu's Aesthetic Ideas", and described in detail Maiorescu's cultural context in the *Junimea* chapter from *Istoria literaturii române* (1944). Equally relevant was a 1940 homage conference in which Tudor Vianu praised Titu Maiorescu – and thus hinted at its own aspirations – for having reached "an unparalleled balance of theoretical thinking and practical application", for being both "the creator of philosophical aesthetics in our culture" and the "unalterable model of any critical activity" (Vianu 1972: 349). But in 1963, Vianu uses a different set of arguments as he attempts to dissociate Maiorescu-the-aesthetician from Maiorescu-the-critic-and-cultural promoter. In his view, the "philosophical, general part" of the Junimea leader's work and his political affiliation stemmed from "questionable principles". On the other hand, Maiorescu's had utterly "praiseworthy" literary initiatives which helped "improve the artistic taste of his time" and "endorse great writers". Therefore, Vianu tacitly acknowledges the current ideological difficulty of integrating this conservative thinker within "the history of philosophy". Instead, he pleads more vocally for Maiorescu's reinsertion (only) in "the history of Romanian literature" as "the creator of the style of ideas" (Vianu 1972: 362, 363). All in all, Vianu's dissociation of the philosopher and the critic is contrary to the holistic view of Maiorescu he himself had expressed two decades before. Does this caution mean Vianu himself has given up aesthetics, a domain he might now consider completely lost to dogma?

[2] For instance, editors of *Scrisori către Tudor Vianu (III)*, 1997 write in the accompanying notes that*:* "Tudor Vianu was not included among the speakers at the Writers' Congress from 18–23 June 1956, nor was he «chosen» among the leading staff", p. 396.

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The truth is the restoration of Maiorescu's legacy was infinitely more stimulating for Romanian literary criticism than it was for aesthetics. Lovinescu and Călinescu would soon come back through the door opened in 1963 and literary criticism of the 60s would revive, in implicit and non-doctrinary forms, the principle of "aesthetic autonomy" which was traditionally traced back to Maiorescu. Ion Ianoşi was right to observe in this respect that Romanian aesthetics remained in the 60s and 70s "the rear guard of the avant-garde which is once again literary criticism" (Ianoşi 1979: 6). Indeed, aesthetics is a strictly academic and dogmatic discipline, with no points of dialogue with the aesthetic assumptions that were *implicit* in the current practice of contemporary literary criticism. This field of cultural forces will inevitably shape the extent of Vianu's aesthetic legacy.

As stated before, the author of *Introducere în teoria valorilor* has no influence in the first, revolutionary and highly ideologized stage of post-war Romanian aesthetics. From a certain viewpoint, however, once the discipline benefits from the general cultural liberalization, Vianu's contribution to the field had to be reassessed, at least from a historical standpoint. This happens, in fact, shortly after Vianu's untimely death. At first, his aesthetic work is disscussed on a rather concessive and condescending tone, leading to a drastically simplified interpretation.

Of course, Tudor Vianu was never a supporter of extreme "idealism" or "aestheticism", so that he might have now become completely taboo. On the contrary, the theorist usually tried to find a middle ground of argument by reconciling the "ideal" and the "material" part of art and by conditioning artistic process on multiple historical and social factors. In his major work, the aesthetician concedes art (only) a relative autonomy and considers that its intrinsic description should be completed by "heteronomic" and "pantonomic" perspectives (Vianu 1976: 218–223). The latter views justify a complex dialectic, ranging from art's function to express the tendencies of a social group to the reverse function of art itself exerting a social influence, such as by creating its own public. Tudor Vianu tried to expand the junctures of the artistic phenomenon to a point where it could provide a totalising image where opposites would meet. However, post-war Marxist aestheticians view this harmonising effort primarily as an attempt – significant, though unfinished – to fight the doctrine of "idealism". In this way, Tudor Vianu's aesthetic contribution is not wholeheartedly reappraised, but rather offered an alibi against the new ideological background: "[Vianu] does not advocate a strictly autonomistic point of view; (...) his work cannot be relegated to classically idealist theses" (Smeu 1967: 3), while "Marxist conception was not contradictory, but rather consonant to Vianu's pluralist view" (Moglescu 1972: 64).

The aesthetician's official recanonization is marked by the 1968 republication of his famous treaty preceded by a massive introductory essay signed by Ion Ianoşi, and by Ion Pascadi's exegesis, *Estetica lui Tudor Vianu*. Both studies represent, at least in length and theoretical coverage, the most comprehensive commentaries Vianu's aesthetic system had received to that point. Therefore, the two essays are crucial to its posterity. Although pertinent, previous readings of Vianu's aesthetics had been either fragmentary and scattered in journal reviews of the treaty's edits until 1945, or published in inauspicious times for public assimilation (for example, Al. Dima's study, *Gândirea românească în estetică*, appeared in 1947, then was

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reedited in 1998 and 2003, when it only had restitution value). Both Ion Ianoşi and Ion Pascadi are new generation aestheticians, and their stemming in Marxism makes them read Vianu's aesthetics in a manner which, even if trying to be exhaustive, is still predictably dictated by the official doctrine.

On the whole, however, the rereading of *Estetica* proves to be fruitful enough. Vianu's two exegetes try – and succeed – to find common ground with Marxist aesthetics not only in Vianu's formal statements after 1948, but also in his former 1934–1936 treaty. Ion Pascadi, for example, praises Vianu for having refused to reduce the problematic of values to the aesthetic principle, for his "scientific" approach of artistic creation, for the emphasis placed on conditions of reception, for the connection he makes between "the national specificity" and "the construction of universality". Pascadi rushes to observe some "idealist" or "spiritualist" bias in Vianu's description of the configuration of the work of art. But he still concludes in positive terms: "Vianu's conception about artistic autonomy [more exactly, about its relativity] is, in fact, identical to the viewpoint of dialectical materialism" (Pascadi 1968: 94). If Ion Pascadi's praise of Vianu conceals perhaps the admiration of a would-be epigone, Ion Ianoşi's analysis is more nuanced and balanced, but reaches equally favorable conclusions. Ianoşi acknowledges the fact that Vianu lacked the precise concepts and the methodological tools to trace the genesis and reception of art, but still appreciates how the professor introduced a sociological perspective as if trying to eschew the then-fashionable phenomenological frame. Ianoşi highlights certain assumptions that could be "very useful precisely to Marxist aestheticians" – among which the principle of the impurity of aesthetic or of art as "labor". His introductory essay is, on the whole, astute and professional. Nevertheless, we are left with the same impression that Ianoşi overestimates the latencies of Vianu's aesthetic system. After all, the author of *Estetica* is praised for not taking theoretical risks rather than for the hard assumptions he had actually made:

> It is striking to see in the work of this disciple of German philosophy the inverse ratio between the study of concrete artistic phenomena and the speculative-metaphysical content. (...) The author voluntarily refrains from abstractions. In an age when irrationalism made havoc among various fields of philosophy, this realist orientation kept the Romanian aesthetician away from excesses and although not Marxist by thinking, he was protected from theoretical errors that might have altered the development of his ideas. Because of this realism, his *Estetica* is still relevant today (...) (Ianoşi, *apud* Vianu 1968: XXV).

In conclusion, the two studies discussed above prove the author of *Estetica* was successfully confronted with the Marxist-Leninist doctrine and was even recuperated as an (improbable!) predecessor of its ideologized aesthetics. It is obvious however that Vianu's reassessment was extremely selective and, at times, it even ideologically biased some of the ideas Vianu had merely sketched. Last but not least, this reassessment reduced the critical relevance of Vianu's aesthetics, once it was reclaimed in line with the ideological discourse. Indeed, Marxist aestheticians praise Vianu almost for the same reasons literary critics of the 60s call down on him: what the former view as theoretical openness, moderation and caution, the latter consider "ecclecticism" and lack of originality. For instance, dwelling on the

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aesthetic vision behind some of Vianu's literary studies, Paul Georgescu observes that the author "may sometimes resort uncritically to irreconcilable methods", but he is eventually able to acquire "a wide comprehension" of art and even to manifest an "integrating" attitude whereby he surpasses "philosophical idealism" and approaches "dialectical materialism" (Georgescu 1973: 2). N. Tertulian speaks similarly about "the composite character of Vianu's theoretical discourse", which integrates "heterogeneous and often adverse schools of thought that range from the phenomenological program of aesthetic autonomy to the historical method" (Tertulian 1981: 6, 9). However, for literary critics like Nicolae Manolescu or Adrian Marino, "heterogeneity" was precisely the weak point in Tudor Vianu's aesthetic discourse. Their 1966–1968 objections were mainly derived, at that point, from an implicit comparison with G. Călinescu's then popular critical model. In any case, post-war Romanian literary criticism would remain reticent to Vianu's aesthetics, so the more as it was reread in line with the official ideology.

But how could we explain Vianu's warm reception by the Marxist aesthetics of the 60s? After all, examples quoted above have shown this reception was based on overestimating the "sociological" intuitions Vianu might have had. In fact, his attempt from *Aesthetics* to "reconcile the methods of phenomenology and historicism" was far from being a conscious denial of Neokantian grounds. On the one hand, it was triggered by Vianu's desire "to revive the domain of philosophical aesthetics in an epoch already shattered by the fragmentarism brought by Bergson's intuitionism" (Muthu 2014: 52). On the other hand, it simply mirrored a didactic habit – also common otherwise in the author's work – to cover the entirety of views in a given field of inquiry. However, Vianu's work was favored against more sociologically oriented aesthetic theories (like those of Gherea and Ralea) also because his middle-ground views were convenient to the cultural politics which, from the second half of the 60s – in Romania as previously in Khrushchev's URSS – hailed a condemnation of the recent past and of its Stalinist "vulgar sociologism":

> Ideological dogmatism treated aesthetics in an antinomical manner: for a while, it rejected aesthetics in which it saw a sort of insinuating, trap-bearing Cinderella, then it lovingly re-embraced aesthetics, acknowledging it as a sort of iconic tool meant to promote dogmatism itself (Smeu 2009: 244).

All these considered, there still is a basic notional accent that ushered Tudor Vianu's aesthetics in the new ideological background: his view of art as "labor"[3]. As soon as the 30s, the author of *Estetica* started using the term on several occasions in order to describe the artisanal, constructed nature of art and its dependence upon the artist's conscious action. This perspective, and the concept per se, marked Vianu's firm opposition to the many interwar doctrines which believed in the spontaneity, irrationality or ineffability of art. Vianu wrote in the preface to the second edition of his treaty:

[3] For a detailed display of this conception, with all its aesthetic and anthropological connotations, see Tudor Vianu, *Opere. 6. Studii de estetică*, 1976, p. 188–193.

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> Art is, in our view, a form of labor, a product of working upon matter. Art appeared to us as the most perfect form of labor, that where the struggle of the worker comes to repose in the wholeness of the finished and harmonious work (Vianu 1976: 8).

The term of "labor" gloriously reappears in post-war Marxist-Leninist rhetoric and thus becomes a sort of password in the new ideological context. It is true the connotations of the term had completely changed in the meantime and "labor" is far from having a(ny) symbolical-artistic meaning for the Party. Nevertheless, the term itself is preserved, thus enabling the reconsideration of Vianu's aesthetic theory and of his studies, recently reset for circulation. In them, reviewers point out an "understanding of art as conscious production of values, as deliberate effort of elaboration", free from "any mystical conceptions" (Dima 1973: 144). Vianu also used the term "labor" quite a lot in his post-war studies of stylistics, perhaps in an attempt to dispel the suspicion of idealism that might have loomed over that domain of "formal" research.

Anyway, through all circumstances we described above, the rereading of Vianu's aesthetics generally oscillated between the official dichotomies autonomy-heteronomy, art-society etc., whose equation could rarely be, until 1989, other than predictable and clichéd. The emphasis on Vianu's sociological views meant overshadowing his philosophical views. In fact, as Petru Vaida underlined in his enlightening comments upon *Opera filozofică a lui Tudor Vianu*, the theorist "had soon realized the drawbacks of cutting aesthetics from philosophy" (Vaida 2004: 149). No wonder that once he completed the treaty conceived as an inventory of the field, Vianu published *Filozofie şi poezie* (1937) and *Semnificaţia filozofică a artei* (1941), two studies which, even if smaller, already sketch a second aesthetics, more personal and open to philosophy (general and of culture). *Filozofie şi poezie* was republished in 1971, but seemed then to resonate with literary criticism more than with contemporary aesthetics: in the preface to the second edition, literary critic Mircea Martin places the disscussion inspired by Vianu strictly within literary hermeneutics and speaks of a "metaphysics of the poetic" conceived as an integral experience, an idea which the critic also derived from the Geneva school of criticism[4].

We might ask ourselves how would Tudor Vianu's aesthetic system have evolved had its organic development not been interrupted. Would the theorist have finally solved the tension between "scientism and nostalgia of metaphysics, between «the need for exactness» and «the need for wholeness»" (Vaida 2004: 145) in the second direction? His last courses – "Problemele filozofice ale esteticii" (1944–1945), "Ideea de operă în filozofia generală şi în estetică" (1947–1948) – first published only in 1978, in the 7th volume of *Opere* – seem to justify a positive answer. The 1934–1936 treaty did not elaborate too much on the metaphysical nature of art, but chose to focus, similarly to M. Geiger or M. Dessoir, on describing the structure and dynamics of the aesthetic object. In consequence, *Estetica* still favors the "scientist" perspective, an aspect Gelu Ionescu acknowledged in his notes to the corresponding edition of *Opere*. Such a perspective eased Vianu's way in the

[4] See Mircea Martin's introductory study, "Simetria revelată a ideilor sau Tudor Vianu despre filozofie şi poezie", in Tudor Vianu, *Filozofie şi poezie*, 1971, p. I–XXVI.

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context of the other, Socialist scientism, to whom the theorist's avoidance of "metaphysical abstractions" seemed laudable. Unfortunately, although it was revalidated *de facto*, this direction of aesthetic research remained less fruitful to the end.

We should not forget the fact that the type of systematic aesthetics Vianu illustrated was still an unpopular genre in the context of Romanian national-Communist culture. Even though editorial production in the domain started to grow from the 70s, it was largely formulaic and irrelevant, consisting of many coursebooks (meant for "factory workers" also), anthologies, histories of "contemporary trends", in a white-noise intellectual landscape. Most often, Romanian aestheticians avoided to set their own original systems, but retreated instead in histories and panorama of "aesthetic ideas". On the other hand, the project of a "multilaterally developed Socialist society" brought forth new aesthetic topics, triggered by the technical-scientific climate, by urbanism or mass-media. Vianu's aesthetics was obviously obsolete in this context: "an attempt to still employ the conceptual system of M. Dragomirescu or even, closer to our times, of E. Lovinescu or T. Vianu looks doomed from the start" (Achiţei 1973: 18). The frame of Socialist culture is not the only one to blame for this: in the second half of the 20th century, general aesthetics was everywhere in eclipse, surpassed by holistic theories like structuralism, then mined by postmodernism's attack against master narratives. Even in Romania, structuralist-oriented semiotics emerged as an academic force from the second half of the 70s and was institutionalized in university. As compared to aesthetics, semiotics was more convenient for a Socialist culture, due to its technical appearance and de-ideologized terminology.

During the eighth and ninth decade of the last century, systematic aesthetics was represented in Romania by just a handful of names, among which Ion Ianoşi, Ion Pascadi or N. Tertulian. However, Tudor Vianu's legacy is still relevant for these authors (of whom at least the former two are more emancipated), because of the specificity of the genre they practiced. They couldn't avoid preaching the historicist-sociological (official) line, but neither could they by-pass the pressure of "aestheticism" which, championed by literary criticism since the second part of the 60s, had already established itself as a tacit, but pervasive cultural trend. In consequence, systematic aestheticians would often stumble upon the dialectics of autonomy-heteronomy, a debate whose landmark had already been set in our culture by none other that Vianu, with his "balance and subtle final harmonising of anthitetical aesthetic perspectives" (Tertulian 1978: 8).

Similar to the case of stylistics, Vianu's legacy in aesthetics was fostered especially at the academic level: the theorist became a classic reference of the domain, but, ossified as such, didn't quite lead to authentic intellectual debates and developments. Romanian post-war aesthetics was only partially emancipated, but remained largely dogm-dependent. Vianu's most important legacy in this respect regarded the impurity of artistic values, an idea *validated by* Vianu's work, although *not clearly derived* from it. Therefore, the second reception of Vianu's aesthetics wasn't more fertile than the first, interwar one. In both cases and with very few exceptions, literary criticism, the most valuable and dynamic compartment of our intellectual milieu, was largely indifferent to the gateways of Vianu's aesthetics.

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As a matter of fact, the post-war reception of Tudor Vianu's aesthetics seemed to divide even more abruptly between "specialists" – most of whom were more or less ideologically conformist – and literary critics. The former were far from enjoying the same prestige the latter acquired from the half of the 60s: "Contemporary criticism sometimes shows an unbridgeable hiatus between professional, applied criticism and systematic works of philosophical aesthetics" (Tertulian 1972: 7). As we already suggested, from the 70s on, the trend of "aestheticism" imposed by literary critics drove otherwise Marxist-oriented aestheticians to reconsider the issue of artistic "specificity".

In what concerns Vianu's aesthetic work, its ideological recuperation went practically at par with its almost complete elusion by most of Romanian post-war criticism. Vianu's rationalist theory, based on a certain relativization of aesthetic values, did not fit at all with the mindset of post-60s literary criticism, which, inspired by the leading legacy of G. Călinescu, advocated an "ineffable" view on literary creation and assumed the principle of aesthetic autonomy. No wonder that, on reviewing some of Vianu's aesthetic studies – part in the 1966 *Postume*, part in the compact 1968 volume – Romanian critics focused on the aestheticians's style of writing – which they considered impersonal, dull, suggesting "the sadness of erudition" –, rather than on his actual ideas. Those ideas, ambivalent as they were with respect to art's autonomy, were no longer relevant for the new generation of critics in pursuit of aesthetic emancipation after the cultural liberalization. As a matter of fact, Vianu's aesthetic ideas seemed closer to official Marxist positions than to the unofficial, but largely shared views of current literary criticism. Of course, this was not a particular disregard towards Vianu, but a more general reluctance to general aesthetics, a domain with inescapably dogmatic constraints that "many consider closed to any original initiatives" (Dimisianu 1975: 11). Romanian post-war literary criticism reaffirmed likewise the interwar criticism's (led by Călinescu and Lovinescu) distrust towards "scientific aesthetics", a distrust only strenghtened by the dogmatic control this domain was now under.

Theoretically speaking, Vianu's speculations upon the social functions of art would still have been critically relevant in the 70s, if we think of the contemporary theories of reception. After all, even in other terms than Vianu's, other interwar aesthetic systems based on a relativization of the aesthetic – like Czech Jan Mukarovský's system – were rediscovered in the 70s by the new sociological criticism, by Soviet and French semiotic schools. In Italy's case, on the other hand, the demise of the so-called "Crocean dictatorship" was sealed by the emergence of a sociologically-oriented semiotics. Tudor Vianu's aesthetics could have inspired a similar critical reform: in a 1973 issue of the journal "Cahiers roumains d'études littéraires" upon literary sociology, Mircea Zaciu and Edgar Papu illustrate "the relation literature-society in Romanian criticism" precisely by Vianu's *Estetica*[5]. Unfortunately, Romanian post-war literary culture found it hard to distinguish sociology from Marxism in critically productive terms. Significant in this respect is that in the example quoted, Mircea Zaciu details Vianu's view about the multiple

[5] The complete thematic file known as "L'écrivain et la societé contemporaine" may be accessed in journal "Cahiers roumains d'études littéraires", no. 1, 1973.

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functions of art, about its social influence or the "creation of a public", but draws a conclusion which otherwise inhibits critical developments: "Tudor Vianu's views encounter contemporary Marxist views about the relation of literature to social existence" (Zaciu 1973: 15). The idea of art's "eteronomy", as Vianu had termed it in 1936, was acknowledged conventionally, when the circumstance required it, but was otherwise left out from Romanian critical practice, with very few exceptions to that rule (among which, without direct connection to Vianu, Paul Cornea stands out). As other recent studies of young researchers suggest, Romanian post-war literary criticism selected critical methods that could enrich textual analysis, but generally avoided stepping into the problematic territory of extra-textual aspects.

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*** *Scrisori către Tudor Vianu (III)*, ediţie îngrijită de Maria Alexandrescu Vianu şi Vlad Alexandrescu, note de Geo Şerban, postfaţă de Florin Ţurcanu, Bucureşti, Minerva, 1997.

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Abstract

The present study tries to draw upon certain aspects concerning the reception of Tudor Vianu's aesthetic work, built around his two-volume major treaty (1934–1936), after 1948, in the intellectual context shaped by the establishment of (National-) Communism. Our arguments regard, therefore, the local history of a discipline (Romanian aesthetics) and the more general history of critical ideas. The first objective of the research is to explain the reasons of the partial, but symbolically significant assimilation of Vianu's aesthetics within the Marxist-Leninist doctrinary climate. Vianu's balanced conception upon the nature and functions of art, his consideration of extra-artistic factors or of aesthetic heteronomy were salutary in view of postwar dogmatic aestheticians. The second aim of the study is to evaluate the relations between the domains of general aesthetics and of current literary criticism after 1964, which were based on dissimilar conceptions of "the aesthetic". As a consequence of that, the reception (and rereading) of Tudor Vianu's aesthetic work was polarized: on the one hand, academic aesthetics, largely dogm-dependent, reassessed the author as a classic reference, on the other hand, literary critics – and supporters of "aesthetic autonomy" – did not meet in any way with Vianu's views upon "aesthetic heteronomy".

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