# THE UNLITERARINESS AND ITS TRANSGRESSIVE FEATURE. ON POETRY AS AN IDEOLOGICAL FORM

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## *Rezumat*

Lucrarea de fata se vrea o analiză a ceea ce au însemnat anii 30 în planul politic, social,economic şi cultural în Statele Unite ale Americii. Pornind de la Virgil Nemoianu cu a sa*Teorie a secundarului*, analiza vizeaza dihotomia "cultură – politică"sau "principal – secundar". Pentru că în fapt cultura nu poate fi în genere autonomă, lucrarea a rezultat din eterna fascinaţie pentru acel "ceva"care este determinantul sau determinatul textului scris, literatura, implicit poezia. Am numit prin ne-literaritate tot ceeea ce înseamnă social, politic şi economic. Această sferă îşi exercită puterea transgresivă, influenţând planul cultural. Perspectiva sociocritică asupra culturii şi literaturii (poeziei) anilor treizeci nu vizeaza stabilirea întâietăţii "principalului" sau "secundarului" în acest raport de influenţe pentru că reciprocitatea este mereu evidentă iar potenţialitatea estetică a textului scris, cu încărcatura ideologică iminentă, trimite spre acea verbozitate briliantă ce a fascinat de la bun început.


Over interpretation is a familiar outcome both of anxiety and of hermeneutics and it is necessary to those brooding on cultural change. The culturalist temptation is a spontaneous effect of current theoretical preferences. However old fashioned it may be, cultural politics embodies a sort of transgression from the 'cultural' to the 'political', or from the 'political' to the 'cultural', and this is the very core of any society encountering transition, partial or radical change. Culture is what hesitates before politics, resists it, in the name of values that transcend the ordinary interests and antagonisms of social life, i.e. culture is in itself already political. Culture remains the necessary element of politics whose means are often strictly cultural. This sounds very Marxist, and it might be monstrous for the people that thought of it as the initiating point of socialism, further more, of communism, and eventually of dictatorship. But it is Paul Ricoeur who said in his *Essays on Hermeneutics* that "We need today a free thinking which is opposed to any operation of intimidation exercised by some people against the others, a kind of thinking that has the imprudence and the ability of intersecting Marx, without following or combating him." (Ricoeur, p. 205 )

Since written culture can never be autonomous, the paper has emerged from the very fascination with the 'other' and the process of 'othering'. This has gone alongside the rise of interdisciplinary studies that are at their best nowadays. The 'other' of social class or of political ideology might prove to be indistinguishable from those who set out to describe it. The issue is that of deciding which of the two (i.e. culture and/or politics) is the 'principal', and than which is the 'secondary'. Faithful to Virgil Nemoianu's *Theory of the Secondary*, literature, implicitly, the 'cultural' is assumed as the 'secondary'. This requires a celebration of the political and of its overwhelming influence. At least, this is the context of the last 11 years in Romania. It is not a betrayal of one's formation; accordingly, the effect is that of remaining intimate to literature. Definitely, Romanians cannot refer to the difficulties implied by transition or change in terms of empathy because they have been experiencing it since 1989.



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Being so much preoccupied with the process of transcending from a social, economic, political and cultural stratum to another superior one, the matter of 'how' (instead of 'what') presupposes a comparative study. Certain Western patterns have been explored, but the most challenging subject seems that of descending into the so-called first or of origin one. This is, at least according to the topic the paper follows, the American pattern of social – democracy.

By the final triumph of the Dynamo over the Virgin, starting with modernism, writers have less and less felt able to retreat into private worlds. Their literature derived from or oriented towards the 'political' which encompasses both the 'social' and the 'economic'. Given the context, they have become increasingly committed to social, political, and therefore public comment. The American rebirth after World War I required the overturning of the 'genteel tradition' (George Santayana's terms), and consequently a new direction in art and society. The years between 1929 – 1937 assisted the Great Depression and the New Deal and their impact challenged the political ideology by means of a Marxist influence, thus grounding the Welfare State. This echoed a change of the individual's position in society. The individual and the social (the 'social' understood to imply the primary sub – group as well as society at large) have become to seem inter-dependent to a degree which would have appeared strange to a Victorian, to the detriment of that individual atomization inherent in Victorian economic arrangements, and of that sense of individual self – responsibility which characterized the morally Victorian ethos. In Noel Annan's terms: "Nothing marks the break with Victorian thought more decisively than modern sociology – that revolution at the beginning of this century which we associate with the names of Weber, Durkheim, and Pareto. They no longer started with the individual as the central concept in terms of which society must be explained. They saw society as a nexus of groups; and the pattern of behaviour which these groups unwittingly established primarily determined men's actions" (apud. Ford, p.17). During late 20s, early 30s, America experienced the progress of events – war, unemployment, economic depression – all of them favouring the concentration on social, economic problems. It was the eternal disparity between ideal and praxis (praxis being life as it was and its representation in people's imagination leading towards ideology). Because of the economic context, the discrepancy between the two constructs was obvious. Thus, people started to get involved, to 'wrestle', and to do politics because the individual was abandoned to social mechanics. He was not content, he did not find sense in the simple fight with nature and in the eulogy of estimation. The technical and economic plan of life satisfied only the 'rational', and not even the 'rational' during the Great Depression. The individual looked for the reasonable in a more concrete universe, which was politics. The age of anxiety evoked a desire for the comforts of a simplifying formula or of a closed system, like Marxism, providing all the answers. The socialists and communists argued that the depression revealed that capitalism was in its 'death throes' because it failed to solve the problem of distributing goods fairly. (Bragdon, McCutchen, p.586) They proposed that the government take control of industry from private enterprise and promised abundance for all when planned economy should replace free competition. Moreover, this was to happen starting with Franklin Delano Roosevelt's government.

There have always been two doctrinaire disputes between the advocates of liberalism and the Marxists. Both ideological trends have dealt with equality and liberty. These were the initiating points of two great systems: the capitalist, respectively, the socialist one. It is well known that economy in Western countries means a compromise between the two. The 'mixed economy' (Mattei Dogan, Dominique Pelassy) in America, or anywhere else, has its roots in the moment of crisis, when the state has to get involved. It took World War I, and the Great Depression to test the limits of dual federalism. The first decades of the 20th century assisted the suffocation of the 'impartial', or liberal state. It had to transform itself



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from the representative of individual exploitation into the one of community 'needs', i.e. the 'providential' state. The disfavoured social groups were those who asked for the intervention of the State and, due to democratic conditions, they even managed to impose it. Two principles were at work: a socio – political egalitarism and a scientific assessment of the importance of the primary group in human contentment. Capitalism as a product of liberal – economic doctrines made steps towards socialism, thus being the promontory of the Welfare State principles, since social welfare policy was based on the premise that society was obliged to provide the minimum welfare for its members. Democracy was not at all compatible with human sufferings, or social inequalities of any kind. (Ebenstein, p. 865) Social reformist legislation, unions, the introduction of gradual taxes also favoured the transformation of the State from a 'spectator' one into a 'providential' one, i.e. the Welfare State. The general welfare, broadly defined, became a legitimate concern of the national government. As mentioned above, the government could no longer rely on either the decentralized political structure of federalism or the market forces of *laissez – faire* capitalism to bring the country out of its decline. Roosevelt's New Deal encompassed the belief that a complex economy required centralized government control. Some call the New Deal era 'revolutionary'. There is no doubt that the period was critical in re – shaping federalism in the United States. Nevertheless, perhaps the most significant change was in the way Americans thought about their problems and the role of the national government in solving them. Difficulties that once had been seen as personal or local problems then became national problems, requiring national solutions.

What was than the commonly accepted metaphysical picture of man, since for the intellectuals this was the deeper and more profound problem during this era of confusion and uncertainty? "To Marxists he is the outcome of economic and social forces, the product of an evolutionary necessity as rigid as any to be found in the natural world."(Ford, p.23) Or, with de Tocqueville's insight: " In the principle of equality I very clearly discern two tendencies; the one leading the mind of every man to untried thoughts, the other inclined to prohibit him from thinking at all...And I perceive now, under the dominion of certain laws, democracy would extinguish that liberty of the mind to which a democratic social condition is favourable; so that, after having broken all the bondage once imposed by ranks or by men, the *human mind would be closely fettered to the general will of the greatest number*." (apud. Ford, p.36) Obviously, it is about what modern sociology initiated: that society as a nexus of groups is the generator of the 'individual', of man, and not conversely.

"Criticizing different manifestations of the attitudes connected with depression and decline in art and literature, the Marxist aesthetics starts with the principles of a profound ideological content, of *identification with the people* and of the *party orientation in art*." (Călinescu, p.172) Because the Marxist influence was obvious during thirties America, politically speaking, it is to see how much of it influenced art, implicitly literature, and thus culture. Matei Călinescu's lines stand for this matter. It should also be mentioned that the "ridiculous attempts of sketching a *left* sort of tradition or a revolutionary one in the case of modern Western literature might only give the ghost of a smile." (Nemoianu, p.12) However in order to 'support' this evidence, Virgil Nemoianu explained: "Much time is spent on demonstrating the overwhelming influence of politics upon literature. [...] Aren't the books of literature some allegories of political constellations and translations meant to offer future motivations for the social order, from the point of view of their utility and purpose? [...] If the involvement of literature in politics is so intimate, is it not at all illogical to expect certain reciprocity? If literature depends so much on politics, it must be something in the sphere of politics that facilitates and stimulates this dependence." (Nemoianu, p.110)



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The economic depression hastened the greatest national collapse after the Secession War. The crash was a very literary and political challenge addressed to the writers of the 30s. Their duty was well formulated in social and political terms. The crisis brought about explicit reactions, politically implied. Most of the writerjoined the left.The label applied to the 30s, the Red Scare, determined Edmund Wilson, Sherwood Anderson, John Dos Passos or Malcolm Cowley to consider that the capitalist system was 'a house which was to crush'. Therefore, they were to join the workers by rejecting the madness of opportunism, of racketeers, of irresponsible and absurd businessmen. (Conn, p.252) The embryos of anti-intellectualism and of suspicion upon art directed the course of political and cultural events towards the overturning of the 'genteel tradition'. Intellectual influences, popular radicalism and political leadership determined the search for a new perception of culture from non–western positions and modernist experiments: social, political, and cultural experimental practice followed by expectancies – subcurrents of anxiety. The first to represent or to identify the people, the mass, was long before the Crisis Walt Whitman. He celebrated the emergence of artists *"commensurate with the people"* and burdened them with the mission to remold society and to bring to their fulfillment the new eras in human history that he found embodied in the American experiment. Whitman's discourses are rooted in a cultural mentality, roots of nationalist discourse: "I celebrate myself, and sing myself, / And what I assume you shall assume, / For every atom belonging to me as good belongsto you." The poet as a bard had to "commensurate with the people" because " the genius of the United States is not at its best in its executives, nor in its ambassadors, colleges [...] but always in common people." While Emerson theorized the force of common language, Whitman used it to revolutionize poetry. The street language, and the work – place one gave him the opportunity to create a new poetry due to its empathic buoyancy. The portrait of the crowd, the mass, became both with Whitman and Baudelaire a symbol of modern cities, because the individual no longer lived isolated. The same pattern of identification with the 'common' appeared later, when Archibald MacLeish, on returning from France in 1930 declared that poetry of his generation surrendered to pessimism, alienation, nostalgia, political conservatism, and the cry of individual isolation voiced so eloquently in Eliot's *The Waste Land*. He called for an extension of the revolution in aesthetics into a social revolution and for an art of 'public speech' addressed, more directly than he thought his generation had been, to social, economic and moral issues. (Norton, p.1024) Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot helped generate the literary revolution emerging in the early decades of the century. Hart Crane recognized that the literary revolution had created the problem of how to sustain it as a tradition in new and continually varied creative effort. A decade before, William Carlos Williams sustained that the expatriate poets betrayed the aims of Modernism by their using of foreign settings and he called for continually new experimentation.

Carl Sandburg had a much – admired forerunner in Whitman, whom he studied carefully. He assumed the condition of the poet as the bard, the sayer and the seer, and subjected himself to different political trends, such as populism, socialism, social – democracy. In *Chicago Poems* (1914), Sandburg published a brief poem that he titled "*I Am the People, the Mob"*. Its light lines stated the thesis on which he based most of his socialist – influenced poems: people are the chore of the world, they revolt, and their salvation can come when they learn to use the misery of the past to make them ask for a better future. "The mob – the crowd – the mass – will arrive then." (*Complete Poems,* p.71) With the precedent of Whitman, the poems included in *Chicago Poems* (1914)*, Cornhuskers* (1918)*, Smoke and Steel* (1920) and *Stabs of the Sunburnt West* (1922) presented a sweeping panorama of American life, its prairies, Eastern and Western landscapes, as well as vignettes of the modern city, with its immigrants, and common people. *The People, Yes* (1936) is on the whole of potential interest to



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the sociologist and the historian than to one preoccupied with literature. The purpose of the book was to explore fully the concepts included in "*I Am the People, the Mob" (Chicago Poems*), and it accumulated aphorisms of the people. Sandburg was also a firm believer in the common mass of man as the source of leadership. "The great man, the rare, strong, splendid individual who gives the world some great action, something of use, beauty, or inspiration, comes up from the mob, springs from the vast mass of nameless, unknown individuals... The finer, healthier, brainier, and stronger you can make the mob, the mass of men, the greater the number of extraordinarily useful and sublime individuals you will produce." (Crowder, p.36) He identified himself with the people, therefore, extensively, he, the artist, was a source of leadership. Thus the artist belonged to an elite having an anti – elitist programme. The elitist – anti-elitist approach was kept alive within the Marxist theory. It was the avant-garde that induced the sense of the artist's mission, granting him the privilege of the leader. (Călinescu, p.95) Accordingly, such poetry was to be an avant-garde – ist one.

" What indeed is needed in even a democratic society, if it is to survive, is 'superiority' in two senses; superiority of insight on the part of writers, so that the worst *and the best* can be faced without distorting emphases on the one or the other; and superiority of manners as a part of general social behaviour so that literature has a context in which it can perform its traditional function of refining understanding and assisting moral discrimination. The two processes, of course, are interdependent; literature both feeds and is fed by the social process." (Ford, p.53) Celebrating plurality, 'the secondary', i.e. literature, is to be reinforced. Whatever the 'principal' is (politics, the social, economic context...), the aesthetic potentiality of a text conveys it towards literature, towards that brilliant verbosity which fascinated from the very beginning. While the text is directing itself to literary renewal, one might say that the 'secondary' is flourishing within it.

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