

LITERARY RECEPTION THEORIES: A REVIEW

From text to context

The concern for a contextualized approach to literature has gradually taken shape throughout the 1960s, as a manner of detachment from the still dominant “immanentism” and “from the formalist and New Critical emphasis on the autonomy of ‘the text itself’ toward a recognition (or a re-recognition) of the relevance of context, whether the latter be defined in terms of historical, cultural, ideological, or psychoanalytic categories” (Suleiman – Crosman 1980: 5).

Eine Dichtung lebt und entsteht nicht als Abglanz von irgend etwas anderem, sondern als in sich geschlossenes sprachliches Gefüge. Das dringendste Anliegen der Forschung sollte demnach sein, die schaffenden sprachlichen Kräfte zu bestimmen, ihr Zusammenwirken zu verstehen und die Ganzheit des einzelnen Werkes durchsichtig zu machen (Kayser 1969: 5),

maintained Wolfgang Kayser, in the 1948 preface of his highly influential work *Das sprachliche Kunstwerk*, the refusal to study literature by taking into consideration “extra-literary phenomena” such as “the personality of an author or his conception of the world, a literary movement or generation, a social group or region, the spirit of an age or the character of a people” (Kayser 1969). Within the same period, in the preface of a similar work, with considerable impact as well, the authors (Wellek – Warren 1956: 8) expressed their conviction that “literary study should be specifically literary”. Employing the famous distinction between “extrinsic” and “intrinsic” approaches to literature, Wellek and Warren expressed their distrust towards the former rather strongly, rejecting it while assuming the pretense of “causal” explanation and accepting it only insofar as it asserts “much more modest claims”, set forth in an elusive manner: scholars who use extrinsic methods

...will seek to establish only some degree of relationship between the work of art and its settings and antecedents, and they will assume that some degree of illumination follows from such knowledge, though the precise relevance of the relationships may escape them altogether (Wellek – Warren 1956: 74).

The “intrinsic” approach, “the interpretation and analysis of the works of literature themselves”, was considered to be “the natural and sensible starting point” of literary scholarship; “in recent years a healthy reaction has taken place which recognizes that the study of literature should, first and foremost, concentrate on the actual works of art themselves”, advocated the authors (Wellek – Warren 1956: 139). The practical dimension of “immanentism” (*Textimmanenz*) is diffuse, since

the latter represents a premise rather than a theory, a method, or much less an autonomous field of study. It is worth mentioning here the stances of Anglo-American New Criticism, of Russian Formalism with its extensions in the Prague School, of Spitzer stylistics, of the literary hermeneutics of Emil Steiger (*Die Kunst der Interpretation*), of the “history of mentalities” such as *Geistesgeschichte* for Oskar Walzel, of Structuralism oriented towards the issue of intrinsic “literariness” or “poeticity” as defining concepts for fiction. The “purism” of such approaches is often less radical than one might expect. Sometimes they offer opening perspectives that subsequently become fruitful: for instance, the sociological turn of semiotic aesthetics of Mukařovský or Vodička or favoring the receiver to the detriment of the author in French Structuralism. It is no wonder that, out of the approaches that have stimulated the polemic reaction of rapid increase in concern with the text-reception binomial, some of them will be taken into consideration both for delimitation purposes and for their employment as theoretical framework.

The “contextualist” openness that took shape simultaneously with the gradual, sinuous and irregular demonetization in various cultural areas of the “linguistic mirage” (Pavel 1988) – I would briefly like to mention the French Post-structuralist phase that implied the shift of the linguistic issue from a methodological to a philosophical point of view, as well as its extensions into the field of American literary and critical theory – occurred as a recouped and out of phase phenomenon, with emphases and priorities variable in time and space.

Overall, in the years 1960-1990, there was a gradual shift in the academe and in the education sphere in general with respect to the manner of understanding the central notion of “literature”, swinging from a “museum” perspective, according to which literature can be perceived as a “library” that offers a vast exploratory space within its own specific system of classification towards a dynamic perspective, directed towards the exploration of the aspects related to social practice – or, in some cases, semiotics – by means of which “literature” is defined as a distinctive domain of cultural interaction. The vane turn is suggestively synthesized, for instance in rephrasing the pivotal question of previous decades – “What is literature?” – in the contextualized form – “*When is literature?*”.

Similar tropisms occur in the field of linguistics as well. The latter, able to confer scientific legitimacy to literary studies, has served as “pilot-discipline” for inter-war stylistics as well as for post-war structuralism. The turn proposed in the work of philosopher John Langshaw Austin, with the telling title, *How to Do Things with Words* (1962), a work that from a linguistic perspective operates a spectacular breach in the purism of famous Saussurean dichotomies, opening the way towards what would be an extremely productive discipline in the following decades – pragmatics – has as counterpart the equally suggestive title of the literary theory book authored by Karlheinz Stierle, *Text als Handlung* (1975). The early 1980s already witness an ambitious attempt to systematically reorganize the

domain of literary studies into an action-oriented version, as illustrated in the two volumes of *Grundriß der Empirischen Literaturwissenschaft*, authored by professor Siegfried J. Schmidt, from the Bielefeld University (1980, 1982).

The contextualized perspective favors, in various forms and with different theoretical options, the reconsideration of those aspects that the mid twentieth-century has debased as being at most “accessories” of literary research *per se*. Firstly, the concern lies in creation and reception – “production” and “consumption”. Subsequently, the range of investigation widens, annexing themes previously considered to be marginal, relegated to the “factual” information, such as intermediation – translators, editors, the circulation of literary texts and so on – or other factors that compete in the functioning of “the institution of literature” in a world ever more profoundly affected by globalization. At the same time, the political relevance of literary studies – lodged almost exclusively in the sphere of canonical debates in the period I deal with – subsequently expands so as to include affirmative action meant to do justice to disadvantaged groups and cultures by means of cultural studies, feminist and gay studies, postcolonial studies and so on.

In terms of the primary equation of the contextualist approach, author – text – receiver, the option for reception is often based, in a preliminary stage, on a strategic suspension or even on a *de plano* contestation of authorial instance. French Structuralism is prone to conditioning the reader’s “emancipation” upon the author’s “death”, a stance that reverberates in the hermeneutical controversies around the “correct interpretation” as well. The programmatic expressions of the “Constance School” are also inclined – particularly when they plead in favor of the reception approach as a solution that brings about an overall revival of literary studies – towards a depreciation of the role of authorial instance, a tendency reinforced by the debates of East-German researchers who use a Marxist foundation in order to support the primacy of “production” over “consumption”. It also happens that the author should be “recovered”, with *de rigueur* adjustments, from the perspective of reception in order to keep the theory balanced.

In the following pages I will refer exclusively to the dynamics of reception theory in the approximate period 1970-1990. There are two reasons for which I considered it appropriate to re-engage this matter. Firstly, to my knowledge, Romanian culture still lacks a detailed description, both in the historical and theoretical sense, of what the “golden age” of reception studies implied. Secondly, an even more important reason as far as I am concerned is that, as the final section will suggest, in Romanian literary scholarship – which is generally avid for synchronization – the impact of Western reception studies, particularly of German influence, has been very scant. After 1990, there has been a swift burning of stages that has propelled us into the sphere of intensely politicized investigations – cultural studies, gender studies, postcolonial studies and so on. I believe that a “recuperative” undertaking is still useful and necessary.

The study of reception

The turn towards reception has been most spectacular in Germany, where the new approach has had the advantage of an incisive and very astute doctrinal crystallization, conducted primarily by Hans Robert Jauss in the years 1967 and 1969, as well as of stipulated acts of assertion.

The impact of Jauss' two "manifestos" (1972, 1975) has been monumental, partly due to the already amassed dissatisfaction in the field of literary study, shrewdly speculated under the guise of the epistemological "paradigm shift" theory, partly because radical views that the author held at the time, which helped him place himself in the "horizon of expectation" of the moment, shaping the outline of a complex reformatory program.

Yet Jauss' colossal intervention is far from installing consensual harmony. The critical reactions vigorously rival the apologetics. The responses arise from very disparate directions. However, the range of polemic stances rapidly gains manifest coherence. The defensive reproaches of "immanentism" and "historicism" are overwhelmed by critics on offensive stances that deplore precisely the half-measure, the secret attempt on the part of the redrafting promulgators of the old paradigm to reach compromise and salvation.

Although the result is not the anticipated convergence, but rather the reciprocal delimitation of certain parallel options, the "provoking" stage of reception studies has brought about the gain of a strong awareness of methodological knowledge. The weak points have been noticed, discussed and debated from the very beginning. In essence, this is about the incompleteness trial instituted firstly against the aesthetics of reception (*Rezeptionsästhetik*) in its narrow understanding (Jauss, W. Iser, Rainer Warning, Karlheinz Stierle, Harald Weinrich and so on) and then against reception studies (*Rezeptionsforschung*) in general, with all its rather unstable subdivisions. The former has been rightly accused of the tendency to ignore the real reader, either by projecting him or her into an uncertain ideality by means of the vague and multi-faceted notion of "horizon of expectation" or by suppressing him or her in order to make room for an equally ambiguous concept derived from textual analysis "implied reader". The various approaches supporting the second subdivision have been attacked for ignoring the assembly of intermediary links that strive to achieve literary communication (for instance, the role of "mediators", of "adapted" forms, of the "institutions" involved in the production, circulation or reception of literature). Thus, the study of reception has extensively broadened and diversified its program through pressure of the many critical stances taken with respect to its premises. The promise of the unifying perspective initially expressed by Jauss was subsequently perceived as a strategic play – with supremacist intention? – which cannot be attributed lack of efficiency. The redrafting program has given extended into quasi-autonomous research branches, joined or not to other disciplines:

phenomenological or semiotic aesthetics of reception, empirical reception studies, sociological, psychological or dialectic reception. For the benefit of convergence, interdisciplinarity and team work have been appealed to ever more vehemently as two stringent necessities of literary investigation.

Outside the German sphere, there has been no coagulating moment of doctrinal expression. The heterogeneity of contributions in the field of literary reception is even more striking here. Robert C. Holub (1984: XII-XIII) separates *reader-response criticism*, “an umbrella term that accommodates systems as diverse as Norman Holland’s ‘transactive criticism’, Jonathan Culler’s structuralist poetics, and Stanley Fish’s affective stylistics” from its German counterpart entitled *reception theory*, which “by contrast, must be understood as a more cohesive, conscious and collective undertaking”. The annotated bibliography of the *audience oriented criticism* mentioned at the end of the *Reader in the Text* anthology (Suleiman – Crosman 1980) comprises approximately two hundred titles, grouped into the following sections: I. *Rhetorical*, II. *Semiotic and Structuralist*, III. *Phenomenological*, IV. *Psychoanalytic and Subjective*, V. *Sociological and Historical*. In fact, Inge Crosman favors this bibliographical selection by means of this type of assertions: “Since any reading – analytical or interpretive – involves texts, readers, and their interaction, I had a wealth of material to choose from” (Suleiman – Crosman 1980: 401).

The distinction between the German aggregation *Rezeptionsforschung* and the Anglo-Saxon one *reader-response criticism* has also persisted because of the meagre knowledge of the former outside of the continent.

Historical premises

The conditions that have favored the turn towards the reader and reception can be traced back to the socio-political circumstances of the late 1960s, to the evolution of literary studies in a moment of quandary, to the mutations that have affected literature. Walter Reese describes the intellectual climate of Federal Germany during the student movements at the end of the sixth decade of the twentieth century:

Traditionelle bürgerliche Werthaltungen wie autoritäre Leistungsorientierung, Hochschätzung materieller Belohnungen, Aufstiegs- und Karriereorientierung sind im Rückgang; ebenso die Betonung von Ruhe und Ordnung etc. Stattdessen hat sich ein im Lebensstil verwurzelt Gleichheitsdenken, ein Bedürfnis nach individueller Autonomie, eine Hochschätzung von Sensibilität und Selbsterfahrung ausgebreitet. (Reese 1980: 27-28)

The inversion of the hierarchies of value gradually leaves its imprint on the domain of education, where democratic norms gain ground to the detriment of authorial models. These changes can be perceived primarily by the more cultivated

social strata that make up the main readership of literature and, at the same time, the social extraction of the young generations of teachers and researchers of literature. As Reese maintains, the issue of social connection is a characteristic of German philology expressed from the very beginning: “als Wissenschaft mit offener augesprochener politischer Tendenz” (Reese 1980: 28). However, it must be added that the promoters of the study of reception are not necessarily specialists in German philology: Jauss is a scholar of Romance languages, Iser specializes in English studies and so on.

A review of the economic, political and social conditions from which the pleas in favor of reception stem includes: the end of the “economic miracle”, “the end of the Adenauer era in 1963, the Great Coalition in 1966, and the rise to power of the SPD on a non-socialist basis”, the structuralization of the extra-parliamentary opposition (APO), the first attempts of historical confrontations with the Hitlerist past, “the final realization with the erection of the Berlin wall that hopes for German unity were futile”, the implications of the Vietnam war, the coming of age of the first post-war generation (Holub 1984: 7-8).

On a scientific point of view, a “methodological crisis” can be perceived (Holub 1984: 7). The assiduous preoccupation with the theorization and problematization of the “method”, of the conceptual apparatus employed by the specialist, has already become remarkable in the field of structuralist poetics. Yet the dilemmas of the period push methodological reflection beyond the intrinsic aspects of research. For structuralists, the method owing to linguistics makes possible the definition of the object of study and ensures the autonomy and scientific prestige of literary scholarship by means of the appropriation of exact sciences. Ever more adamantly, a new, theological component: *what for* is added to the methodologically regulated relation between *what* and *how*. Doubts are expressed about the “legitimacy” of literary study in the manner it has been understood and practiced under the dominance of “immanentism”: *Legitimationsschwierigkeiten* (Grimm 1975: 11), *Legitimationskrise* (Reese 1980: 27). “Eine der Literatur zugestandene gesellschaftliche Funktion legitimiert ja auch die wissenschaftliche Beschäftigung mit ihr”, asserts Grimm (1975: 11-12). The importance attributed to the “utility value” (*Nutzwert*) of the study of literature goes against the Saussurean tendency towards the “autonomization” of the humanities. This is the prologue to a long, profound and ongoing change of cultural perspective.

Equally important is the fact that the study of reception is stimulated by the necessity to re-evaluate the “official” values of literary history amenable to increasing disavowal pressures. In Jauss’ perspective, the solutions brought by reception theory are viable even when they point to opposite directions:

On the one hand, it represented a method of looking at the old canon anew, for re-evaluating the past and thus rescuing the old standards from this onslaught of

insolent plundering. On the other hand, as Jauss makes clear in his reference to the mass media and popular literature, it provided a basis for analyzing those works that had been traditionally excluded from selections, as well as reasons for this omissions (Holub 1984: 10).

On the one hand, the ambivalence of reception theory, which is recommended for its “emancipatory” character and judged for its “confirmative” tendencies” – despite the undoubtable preference made manifest by the representatives of the “Constance School” in the pioneering stage for the values of “negativity” in literature – constitutes one of the main arguments in the debate determined by Jauss’ reformatory program.

Last but not least, I must mention the mutations underwent by literature itself. Holub presents a few examples such as the success of documentary literature, the implication of the audience in the development of the theatrical performance, the intensification of the preoccupation with the reaction of the reader in the novel. Reception theory itself has attempted to prove the fact that highlighting the role of the reader represents one of the fundamental characteristics of modern literature. “Die Entdeckung der Leserrolle bei Weinrich, Harth, Poulet und anderen wurde offenkundig angeregt, ja erzwungen durch die strukturellen Veränderungen im modernen Roman” (Hohendahl 1974: 18). These changes do not refer exclusively to the evolution of the novel, even if they might occur predominantly in this type of literary works and they might be easier to elucidate by means of narratological analysis (Lange 1974: 35). In turn, casting a retrospective glance upon the “prehistory” of reception theory, Jauss signals “analogies worthy of consideration” between on the one hand the new, 1960s approaches in the study of literature and, on the other hand, “the practice of postmodern aesthetics” (Jauss 1990: 66), mentioning Borges (*Pierre Ménard, Author of the Quixote*) and Italo Calvino (*Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore*) as examples.

The enhancement, diversification and refinement of the creation strategies that configure the “role” of the receiver in the text are also stimulated by the changes that occur in the composition of the reading public. The spectacular rise and the ever more pronounced distinction between categories of consumers of literature make the global concept of “public” inoperable in contemporary times. Surely, this is not a recent plea. Victor Lange (1974: 35) situates the early split of the literature reading public approximately in 1970. Clearly distinguished categories of receivers have existed before and they are relevant particularly if we consider the distinctions between written and oral literature, between “authored” and “folk” literature. However, starting with the eighteenth century they are no longer distributed according to borderlines between different types of culture. The mutations that have occurred and are considered by some to be a “revolution of reading” are directly linked on the one hand to dislocations and social amalgamations on a large scale and on the other hand to an unprecedented rhythm

acquired by the spread of literacy. In the Romanian sphere, the most spectacular cue is probably given by the “rivalry” between the printed writings and the manuscript copies during the Enlightenment and even at the beginning of the following century. One of the most important consequences of the disintegration of the unity of the reading public is differentiation between various levels of literature and its ensuing consequences. This can be observed in Romania starting with the national Romanticism around 1848.

In the seventh and eight decades of the twentieth century, the conceptualization of “postmodernism” has reinforced a series of socio-literary observations within the field of reception theory. I would like to offer a single example: the phrase “multiple offer text” enters the terminological inventory widely spread towards the end of the millennium. Seemingly, this concept represents merely a variation within the repertoire of “ambiguity”, “polyvalence”, “unlimited semiotics”, “open work” from the supply of “immanentist” aesthetics. Although the distinction is apparently subtle, it marks the separation between two contrasting stances with respect to literature. In the first case, the “openness” of fiction is perceived as an invitation to explore an inexhaustible totality of signifiers. In the second case, the text implies the existence of multiple possible levels of self-sufficient reading in its own structure.

The “open work” is an intensional “immanentist” concept that refers to the interpretative potential *in* the text and implies the relation with *a* reader – whether individual, general-collective, abstract or, in turn, potential. The typically modern perception of the semantically inexhaustible literary text attempts to legitimize an explanation of the very different – if not divergent – literary interpretations on the grounds of textual analysis foundation.

On the contrary, the idea of the “multiple offer text” – in fact suited only for fiction – implies the conscious linking of the author within the frame of the same literary work with *groups of readers* or *types of readings* that are differentiated and also make use of distinctive norms, interpretive strategies and evaluation criteria. In this case, the plurality of readings is perceived not only as a consequence of the text itself, but also, or primarily, as a result of the conditioning of *literary communication*.

The change in the structure of the reading public carries disturbances in the “agreed upon stratification of literature”. The transgression of the borders between the levels of “high” and “low” literature, as well as “peddled literature” (Link 1976: 64 *sqq*) with respect to literary creation, the attempts to subdue or even do away with instances of evaluative discrimination in theory as well as in practice, the ever more enhanced concern for the “lower” levels usually ignored or marginalized in the academic tradition, favors or calls for approaching the issue of literary interpretation from the perspective of reception.

“Popular literature” (*Unterhaltungsliteratur*, *Trivilliteratur*) becomes the object of study for an overwhelming number of researchers. One of the reasons for

this is that the intensely standardized literary phrases offer a greater degree of transparency that allows for the examination of the mechanisms of the “institution of literature”. At the same time, the analysis without *parti pris* of certain products that have been depreciated or neglected by literary criticism and literary history help problematize the “canon”, tacitly circulated by exegetical tradition (Grimm 1977: 119) and thus, emancipate the researcher from the status of transmitter – often unconsciously – of current norms.

The “democratization” of the field of investigation is produced on a synchronic as well as on a diachronic level. From the very beginning, reception theory is directly involved in solving the literary dilemmas of the age. Ever since 1949 René Wellek’s famous “aporias” made manifest the stalemate reached by the immanentist approach when dealing with “historicity”, a central issue for diachronic research: “Most leading histories of literature are either histories of civilization or collections of critical essays. One type is not a history of *art*; the other, not a *history* of art” (Wellek – Warren 1956: 253, *passim*). The focus on the relation between text and reader could avoid paradox by offering the possibility of the integration of literature into specifically historical circuits.

Apart from the elements that have supported the extraordinary impulse towards reception theory, it would be worth mentioning the factors that have contributed to its delay. Firstly, there were technical difficulties: the toilsome access to documentary sources for the historical research of the reading public, the heterogeneity of “consumer groups” of literature, particularly in the modern period (Grimm 1975: 12).

Theoretical and methodological pillars of support of contemporary reception studies

A systematic presentation of the theoretical and methodological directions that support the study of reception and the precursors it annexes are hindered by numerous factors: the circumstantial character of the “genealogies” denounced by the promoters of the new approach themselves, marked by local differences between the manners of imposition or the forms of manifestation that the concern towards reception and receiver take, without excluding the circulation of influence between cultural spaces, the variety of research undertakings under the much too generous umbrella phrase “the new paradigm”, the terminological instances of hesitation that enhance the feeling of confusion.

Firstly, I will mention a few landmarks of German reception studies.

The extrapolation of the “scientific revolutions” theory brought forth by Thomas S. Kuhn into the field of literary scholarship served primarily as a strategic move on Jauss’ part by means of which he significantly enhanced the shock value of his essay *Paradigmawechsel in der Literaturwissenschaft* (Jauss 1972). “By adopting Kuhn’s popular theory of scholarly change, it sets up a ‘plot’

whose outcome must be favorable to reception theory” (Holub 1984: 12). As it can be noticed, the crumbling of the “old paradigm” is due not only to epistemological causes, but also to concurrent pressures with socio-political underlayers.

A fundamental anthology of the aesthetics of reception (Warning 1975) includes alongside Jauss, Iser and the editor, texts by Roman Ingarden, Felix V. Vodička, Hans Georg Gadamer, Michael Riffaterre, Stanley Fish: phenomenological aesthetics, the “Prague School”, philosophical hermeneutics, structural and generative-transformational stylistics.

Gunter Grimm (1977: 10) identifies four directions that lead the way towards the issue of reception: the sociology of literature, hermeneutics, Praguian structuralism and literary history. The former category includes research into biblioteconomy (*Bibliothekswissenschaft*, Grimm 1975: 20-21). The models of communication theory (Grimm 1977: 15), adapted to the domain of literature either from the perspective of the history of aesthetics and literary criticism (D.H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp*, 1958), or from the viewpoint of the text’s semiotic theory (Heinrich Plett, *Textwissenschaft und Textanalyse*, 1975) also conduce to the clarification of the issue of reception. Robert Holub also mentions Russian Formalism alongside other influential sources for and precursors of German reception theory, due to the possibilities of “reconversion” of certain central notions (“procedure”, “isolation”, “denudation of the procedure”, “literary evolution”) to the benefit of the new approach. Indeed, from the very beginning, Russian Formalism is tackled by Jauss (1975: 141-144) in order to make a few amendments and additions rather than with the intention of rejecting it.

Significantly, the strategy of the “shock moment” avoids references to the German philological tradition of the historical study of reception dating back to the last century (*Historische Rezeptionsforschung*, Jörn Stückrath 1979: the collections of documents *Goethe in den Zeugnissen der Mitlebenden* by Varnhagen von Ense, 1823; *Über Goethe. Literarische und artistische Nachrichten* by Alfred Nicolovius, 1828; *Lesing im Urteile seiner Zeitgenossen* by Julius W. Braun, 1884-1897; the monographies *Goethe und das Publikum* by Victor Hehn, 1887; *Die Lessing-Legende* by Franz Mehring, 1893; *Schiller und die deutsche Nachwelt* by Albert Ludwig, 1909). However, in the 1960s, this tradition was overshadowed. Exactly in the following decade Stückrath would state that: “der rezeptionsgeschichtlichen Forschung fehlt das Bewußtsein ihrer eigenen Geschichte”, therefore “Hans R. Jauss z. B. hat den Eindruck erweckt, als handelte es sich bei der Rezeptionsforschung insgesamt um einen Neubeginn” (Stückrath 1979: 6). The fall into abeyance of the early nineteenth century pioneering initiatives as well as the marginal character of the research that continues on the same path in the following one are last but not least due to the precariousness of methodological reflection with respect to the object, aim and method of investigation (Stückrath 1979: 7-10). Even in the much more generous review of the “prehistory” of reception theory, in which Jauss (1990) drafts a few lines of

continuation starting with Homeric or Biblical hermeneutics, such studies do not belong here. Fruitful suggestions arise rather from the newer “recovered” writings of literary sociology: the sociology of taste (Leon L. Schücking), of fame (Julian Hirsch), the psycho-sociology of reception (Leo Löwenthal). After Grimm (1975: 21) “die Anstöße zu einer Verbindung der Literatur mit gesellschaftlichen Interessen kamen von außerhalb der Germanistik”. Jean-Paul Sartre with his influential essay *Qu'est-ce que la littérature* (1947) and Robert Escarpit (*Sociologie de la littérature*, 1958) are mentioned among others. Hohendahl describes this cultural bridge in a more specific manner:

Durch die deutsche Romanistik (Jauß, Weinrich) wurden die französischen Ansätze nach Deutschland vermittelt. War in Frankreich die positivistische Lanson-Schule der (verspätete) Gegner, spielte im Deutschland eher der Historismus und die traditionelle Hermeneutik die Rolle des Opponenten. (Hohendahl 1974: 19)

However, ever since 1903, there have been incentives particularly on Lanson’s part to engage in an expansion of the historical-literary study horizon, in order to include “le tableau de la vie littéraire dans la nation, l’histoire de la culture et de l’activité de la foule obscure qui lisait, aussi bien que des individus illustres qui écrivaient” (*apud* Genette 1972: 14). In 1904, the famous literary historian, “so expeditiously and unjustly judged in the 1960s” (Cornea 1988: 61), discussed the relationship between literary history and sociology, taking into account, among others, the circumstances of literary creation with reference to the connections established between the author and the reading public (Lanson 1974: 63-87). The Lansonian project remained a desideratum and it was appealed to by Lucien Febvre, between the two world wars and later, even by Roland Barthes in 1960 (Genette 1972: 15).

Starting with the “provoking stage”, the theory of reception allies itself with the sociological study of literature. In an attempt to counter the Marxist doctrine that assigns a predominantly representational function to literature, Jauss (1975: 154) proposes in the seventh “thesis” of his manifesto, the employment of the social-formative function (*gesellschaftsbildende Funktion*). Consequently, the relation literature-society might undergo a 180° shift. Instead of interpreting this relation fortuitously as a reflection of a pre-existing reality or as a matter of conditioning the work according to the author and the latter according to the context, it will be tackled in terms of the effect that literature has upon social life. An often considered illustrative case is that of the “Werthereanism” brought about by the famous novel written by Goethe in his youth. This time as well, the novelty of vision of reception theory is relative. The concern with the “formative function” of art is one of the constant elements of critical and literary theory, even when it appears under the derisory guise of pedantic and restrictive moralism. However, in the “case study”, the distinction between the causal and the final relation is blurred. For instance, deciding to what extent a work or a set of works “reflects”

current social norms or “proposes” alternative ones becomes toilsome the moment we renounce the image of society as depository of a homogenous normative group. The distance between Jauss’ *La Douceur du foyer* (1983: 389-426) and, for example, Lucien Goldmann’s theory of “structural homologies” (1972: 255-275) is not exactly insuperable. In fact, a sphere in which the social effect of literature in terms of its impact upon human behavior can be perceived with striking clarity is... literature itself. The character who is marked or even shaped by reading offers the “intrinsic” approach the chance of juncture, where intertextuality joins the art-life dialectical play.

From the hermeneutical perspective, reception theory avails itself primarily of Hans Georg Gadamer’s theories (1965). For the disciple of Martin Heidegger, understanding does not merely imply the reader bringing to the present the meaning of a text. The former, in turn, is historically conditioned. “Das Verstehen der Texte ist durch ihre Wirkungsgeschichte vermittelt”, sums up Hannelore Link.

So scheint die Bezugnahme auf den ursprünglichen Leser ebenso wie auf den Sinn des Verfassers nur einen sehr rohen historisch-hermeneutischen Kanon darzustellen, der den Sinnhorizont von Texten nicht wirklich begrenzen darf (Gadamer 1965: 373, *apud* Link 1980: 125).

Determining the parameters of understanding by means of tradition offers a promising foundation for the study of reception. The “text itself” can be assessed as fiction arbitrary postulated by the researcher. The key concept of the “fusion of horizons” (*Horizontverschmelzung*), in which what is fused is the text-tradition-receiver triad dynamics reverberates in Jauss’ main central points. Reception theory assumes the role of pointing out, with methodological rigor that “die Geschichtlichkeit der Literatur beruht nicht auf einem post festum erstellten Zusammenhang, literarischer Faktoren’, sondern auf den vorgängigen Erfahrung des literarischen Werkes durch seine Leser” (Jauss 1975: 128).

Roman Ingarden (1931) also offers theoretical premises in favor of the exploration of the role of the reader in the generic domain of literature. Ingarden distinguishes between the work of art as material object and its *concretizations* as esthetic entities through the participation of the receiver. The structure of the work of art allows for distinct concretizations and even more, this well-known reality in the history of reception represents a constitutive element of the aesthetic. However, the possibility of postulating or even of detecting a relation of adequacy between the work and its various concretizations remains vague and problematic. The idea that a literary text can be defined as the sum of its potential readings was supported in Romania early on by Mihail Dragomirescu (1969: 461-462) in terms of the individual/ species opposition and opens up an unlimited horizon of manifestation for receptive subjectivism. Postulating an infinite number of possible readings entails projecting the work in complete indetermination, renouncing any instruments of prediction. Yet, the succession of the already

registered responses shows that some of them tend to be eliminated as “inconsistent with the text”. The “openness” of the literary work, analyzed by Umberto Eco (1962), undergoes a series of correctives, so that the issue of “fidelity” to the text cannot be completely disregarded, irrespective of how depreciated it might have recently been. For instance, it attracts almost all debates generated by the shocking “modernizations” in scientific or cinematographical adaptations of literary texts. The same extremely delicate issue is touched upon by Umberto Eco’s (1979) subsequent redefinitions of the “openness” and “completeness” of the literary work, in which the theorist endows the reader with more power than in *The Open Work* and attempts to do away with arbitrary readings by distinguishing between “cooperative” reception and a “usage” that violates the text as the reader pleases. Similarly, Paul Cornea considers that reading instances can be placed on a “scale” according to the fidelity with respect to the text. Therefore, “interpretation can be placed on the highest position, which stands for maximum adequacy, free reading can be situated on the lowest position (as the reader pleases), and standard reading on a central position” (1988: 247). It is worth noticing that such delimitations can be useful as explicative and descriptive landmarks as well as indicators of normative implications. In the present study, this involves literature itself and the manner in which it can be approached. If the constitutive “openness” of literature – that is structurally achieved through polysemanticism, ambiguity, indetermination, “gaps”, intertextuality and so on – offers the reader considerably more freedom and at the same time it simultaneously proposes reading strategies for putting this freedom into effect. It implies a simultaneously more “lax” and more “intense” decoding and interpretation. Hence, it is no wonder that Eco’s reflections lead to paradox, so that “ein geschlossener Text für jede Art von Reaktion offen ist und ein offener Text die Möglichkeiten für den Leser, mit dem Text umzugehen, beschränkt” (Hawthorn 1994: 231-232). In the case of Ingarden, the conditioning of text adequacy parameters can even lead to contradiction, since different receptors – regardless of their level of literary competence – can only discuss their own concretizations. The “text” as such disappears as negotiable object.

A proper context for solving this dilemma is shaped in the field of aesthetics by the Prague School and more specifically by Jan Mukařovský (1974). Since the aesthetic work is considered to be a semiotic product with specific characteristics, the social implications of this definition are inescapable:

Is the interpretation of the work of art as a sign an exclusively individual affair, different and incompatible from one person to another? I anticipated the answer to this question when I maintained that the work of art is a *sign*, which makes it in essence a social fact. [...] Therefore, the result reached by the analysis of the semiotic nature of the work of art is far from being aesthetic subjectivism: it has only been shown that the objective relations that the work of art as a sign establishes, engage the attitude of the

receiver with respect to reality, since the former is a social being, a member of a collectivity (Mukařovský 1974: 80-81).

The characteristics of art are shaped through the interdependencies of the triad: function, norm and aesthetic values, “in the analysis of which, the starting point must be the social nature of the three phenomena” (Mukařovský 1974: 91).

Reception theories; directions and approaches

I have insisted upon the circumstances in which the Jaussean turn occurred as well as upon the theoretical pillars of support that the latter claimed in order to produce a comparative analysis of the reasons behind the weak adherence of reception theories to Romanian cultural contemporaneity and to propose a series of possible affiliations or filiations with and from theoretical stances that I believe have been (and, to some extent, still are) highly influential in Romania even if they played the role of avowed “historical roots” in relation to the imposition of the “new paradigm”. Hence, even to the detriment of a more rigorous analytical approach, “historicization” has culturological justification – explicative and recuperative. Meanwhile, the assembly of reception theories and the manner in which it distinguished itself and developed starting with the 1960s onwards have become a quasi-compulsory chapter for literary theory works or dictionaries.

A more detailed content analysis of this wide range of theoretical positions does not belong here. Ever since the 1980s there have been many works of synthesis dedicated to this subject and meant to build cultural bridges between different theoretical schools, be they between the Anglophone and Germanophone cultural spaces (Tompkins 1980, Holub 1984, Freund 1987) or less commonly, there have been attempts to link European theory to the overseas autonomously developed investigations (Klemenz-Belgardt 1982). I have also already sketched a review of the range of reception theory versions in *Literatură și comunicare (Literature and Communication)* (Papadima 1999: 21-25). However, I will briefly go through a rather historically oriented chapter dealing with reception theories and, more specifically, East-West German debates for two reasons. Firstly because the debates brought about by East-German researchers touch upon – not despite, but rather due to excessive partisanship – multiple neuralgic points of reception study in general, *beyond* the expressions mentioned above. Secondly, because the East-German reaction constitutes a useful contrasting base for the explanation of the weak grip that reception theories had in the Romanian cultural space.

The East-West German debate

The debate was brought about against the backdrop of the rivalry between the two sides of Germany, given the fact that the common cultural past and language created serious problems regarding the demarcation tendencies in the sphere of the cultural policies adopted by the two countries after separation. The campaign started in the West and its most often mentioned representatives, Jauss and Iser, attacked what was ultimately the entire set of ideas of the literary Constance School, which was considered to be a threat against or assault on the ideological premises of Marxist literary theory. In his inaugural lecture, Jauss (1972) had indeed adamantly referred to this by means of a global, rather simplifying critique shaped by imputing the narrow determinism of the Constance School, derived from the doctrine of the “reflection” of society in the work of art. However, the East-German response does not merely imply such rather vulnerable and marginally important, persuasive evaluations with regard to the theories expressed by the Constance Romanist. It also attempts to impose its own view point in the sphere of reception theory by means of discrediting its opponent. Central to this debate (retrospectively analyzed by numerous researchers among whom, Holub 1984: 121-133, Reese 1980: 43-53, Grimm 1975: 42-50), is the concept of literature itself, authorized at the level of a social (and, of course, political) system.

The impetus towards tackling reception issues had already been shaped in DRG during the mid-1960s, although it came from another direction: that of biblioteconomy (Mandelkow 1974b: 379). From the very beginning, the differences with respect to the West-German doctrine prove to be irreconcilable. The options are polarized around two key-notions: *Wirkungsforschung* for the East side and *Rezeptionsästhetik* for the West side. Literary “effect” implies the primacy of the text in guiding the reader’s reactions, while “reception” assigns an active role to the reader who becomes a “coauthor”, coparticipant in the construction of the text. Subtle differences, great controversies. “Gerade die Probleme der Rezeptionsästhetik zeigen in aller Evidenz den ideologischen Charakter literaturtheoretischer Debatten” (Mandelkow 1974b: 387).

Est-Germans maintain their position – it is difficult to say whether out of conviction, opportunism, precaution or constriction – as defenders of an ideological “dirigisme” that sees the literary text primarily as an instrument of shaping the reader. For this reason, the text’s essential “univocality”, understood as a “message” remains unalterable and untouchable.

Wenn in den hier besprochenen Arbeiten marxistischer Theoretiker, Eindeutigkeit’ als Wirkungsbedingung von Literatur postuliert wird, so steht hinter dieser Forderung die Utopie einer nicht mehr antagonistischen Gesellschaft, für die Bedingung und Notwendigkeit einer ‘Parteiung’ des Publikums aufgehoben oder überflüssig geworden ist (Mandelkow 1974b: 387).

It should also be added that prohibitive and manipulative systems help service the Marxist “utopia” in culture as well as in socio-political life, so as to obtain the desirable convergence of literary “effect” by means of amputations and disfigurement at the level of the dissemination or mediation of literature in the editing process or the reception approach.

From a diachronical perspective, the same premises are appealed to in reference to the relationship with the “literary heritage” of the past. The “effect” that the texts of previous writers will supposedly have upon contemporary readers is considered to be a criterion of selection and value. *Wirkungsforschung* is susceptible of being listed as an annex of the socialist cultural policy. In fact, ideological – and praxeological – research endeavors are sometimes more decisive:

Considering that the force of literature is made manifest through its appropriation, the result is that appropriation processes cannot be given over to spontaneous reactions but, on the contrary, all possibilities must be exhausted in order to gain influence upon them and their results” (Naumann 1973: 97).

Reception and effect

In actuality, the issue of differentiation between the two notions – “effect” and “reception” – far exceeds the limits of the above mentioned ideological debate and of the historical circumstances in which it was held. Not as a last resort, placing reception studies in relation to a similar tradition of literary studies – that is much longer and richer than the apologists of the “new paradigm” insinuate – depends upon the signification given to the terms of the effect-reception binomial that has undergone classifications in numerous works (Grimm 1977: 22-31, Zimmermann 1977: 14-17). For instance, is there a line continuity between Aristotle’s *Poetics* and Jauss’ “program”? The philosopher’s work is mentioned or analyzed as a trailblazer also in studies that deal with *Rezeptionsforschung* (Stückrath 1979: 1) and with *Wirkungsästhetik* (Turk 1976: 47-54). Terminological clarifications remain vague and inoperative as long as they remain under the restriction of the opposition, expressed and reoriented towards the wider range of possible approaches to literature. Two types are worthy of being mentioned: the categorical variety of “responses” to literary creation and the variety of their research interests. I use the term “response” in its specialized understanding, as equivalent to the Anglo-American *response* and I prefer it over the more precise, literal translation “reaction” that implies a deceiving closeness to a literary communication mechanicist model. The text itself cannot be perceived as a form of “action” upon the receiver in terms of an inertial system. Indeed, we are talking about the “shaping action” of literary works upon readers, the “influence” of literature upon mentalities, attitudes, behaviors or the emotional “reaction” triggered by a certain text. Yet it is always the receiver the one who “eliminates

the inertia” of a text, whether the latter is presented in the “silent” form of a printed book or in the “volute” form of a theatrical performance or a poetry reading. Without the intervention of the receiver by means of the entire supply of perception processes, decoding, comprehension, interpretation, emotional and value-giving implication, “reactions” of the types mentioned above cannot occur. The distinction between the “active” or the “passive” role of the receiver does not affect the sphere of the notion of “response”. The similarities with the conceptual scheme of behaviorist psychology can be profitable, with the essential mention that the literary text does not represent a stimulus that is merely received, but also to great extent “built” by the receiver, in different phases and on different levels.

Thus, reader “responses” can be shocking or desirable, whether they are associated with the general functions of literature (or even of aesthetic creation in general), with specifications of genre, be they narrower or wider (from the “catharsis” of tragedy to the “mimetic illusion” that operates in multiple artistic spaces) or with techniques, devices, artistic means (in the “theory of figures”, in the antique tripartition of styles and so on). All of the above are the object of literary effect aesthetics. *Wirkungsästhetik* is linked with questions such as: what reactions does literature – or categories, or parts of it – aim to trigger, to what purpose and through what means? Such series of questions can be found in works that assert themselves through tradition or through title in the domains of aesthetics, rhetoric, poetics (even contemporary poetics) and stylistics.

In addition, there are actual “responses”: what really goes through the mind of a reader in the process of reading. We can learn about the existence of these responses from our individual reading practice: we are simultaneously readers and “spectators” of our own engagement with books. Unfortunately, this type of “response” remains, by definition, sealed in individual experience. However, we can make use of mediated access ways, starting with a multitude of subsequent testimonies: from informal conversations on literary themes and school essays to academic studies. Furthermore, with respect to the reader and current literature, we have the possibility of obtaining called forth testimonies as well as the chance (at least theoretically) of diminishing as much as possible their degree of interpretability. The use of questionnaires, tests or experiments represents a distinct, if not compulsory, particularity of the approach generically known as empirical research of literature (*empirische Rezeptionsforschung*). However, as briefly mentioned before, the positive foundation of empirical research does not eliminate methodological and epistemological dilemmas. While the former direction considers that the “real” object to be represented by a “desirable response”, the latter proposes the “desirable” object as “real response”. The series of questions that the empirical research of reception assumes either explicitly or implicitly – who, what, under what conditions, how reads or has read – allows for so many ramifications, that its “object” of investigation appears from the very

beginning in extremely diverse and difficult to pin down instances. In addition, the information basis overlaps that of other types of literary study to great extent.

Hence, there are externalized “responses” that form documentary material for empirical research and beyond. Such testimonies are used in most literary histories and the often vague intentions vary as well. For instance, the posterity of an author is presented in order to document the prestige acquired, the influences exercised, in order to stress the fluctuation in the interpretation and evaluation of his/ her work, to clarify the image of the respective work or to build a background of polemical contrast meant to make the personal perspectives of the literary historian doing the assessment more plausible and more challenging. Essentially, this amounts to two questions: how can the knowledge of reception documents help enhance the knowledge of received works and – more inclusively – the understanding of the system of literature, of its functioning and all of its correlative aspects: the existence of literary works, their production, processing, mediation and reception? Usually, literary histories lack the time to vehemently voice such questions: they have already made too many statements. Thus, the tradition abounds in descriptions of literary reception and less in attempts to form an explicative systematization, even when we are dealing with studies particularly devoted to the posterity of a certain author. Jorn Stückrath (1979: 7) rightfully accuses the literary history of literary reception not only of being deficient in the “consciousness of its own history” [“das Bewußtsein ihrer eigenen Geschichte”], but also of being weak in aspects of methodological reflection: “the insufficient clarification of its object, of its cognitive aims and devices” [“Daß es der historischen Rezeptionsforschung zudem an einer zureichender Klärung ihres Gegenstandes, ihrer Erkenntnisziele und ihrer Verfahren mangeln”].

One must not forget the fact that in relation to actual responses, externalized “responses” acquire a second degree status: they are socio-cultural products that enter an assembly of coordinates that is sensibly different from the one of reception *per se*. The writer of a literary review simultaneously does more and less than translating his or her practiced reading experience into public speech. Of course, it represents the *ab quo* mark, but not the *ad quem* one. Diminishing the distance between the two points of view – which, incidentally, can be very significant: the case of the reviewer with “obligations” and so on – that so intensely occupies the minds of test and questionnaire writers is sometimes utterly ignored by literary historians. It is true that this distance can be relatively of minor importance when the document is used for the exploration of the work’s latencies. However, it becomes fully relevant if the purpose is to analyze the system of literature: in this case mediation and processing represent something more than merely forms of reception.

In addition, there is another distinctive category that I would call subsequent “responses” (and not testimonies!): they are consequences and not just manifestations of actual “responses”. It is here that the traditional issues of

“imitation”, of literary influences as well as of the modifications (be they cognitive, attitudinal or behavioral) that literary reading can produce may be discussed. More often than not, such incredibly heterogeneous phenomena are categorized as “effect”, less in the sense of “reaction” than of “consequence”. Antique aesthetics avoided drawing a clear line of demarcation on the methodological point of view, but paid particular attention to the causal-teleological correlations, in tune with rhetoric, in practice. For instance, pleasant instruction is efficient: *ridendo castigat mores* and so on. For the moderns, this blurring of lines often seems to pertain to the domain of heresy. This makes the sociologist’s task more difficult, since he or she has to ask: ultimately, what are the consequences of literary reading in the context of social coexistence? The data gathered thus far rely significantly more on the abstraction of various hypothetical functions that result from the analyses of literary texts rather than on empirical research, the difficulty of which is adamantly acknowledged by sociologists.

Therefore, this is the resulting picture, although rather schematic and lacunose: a theoretical, often speculative “aesthetics of effect”, that starts from texts and aims for the textual aspect of literature, involving or frequently expressing normative generalizations, relying when need be, with confirmative title, on psychological and behavioral, introspective or public observations, operating in the field of philosophical aesthetics, of rhetoric, poetics or stylistics; an empirical, synchronic or diachronic research based on existing or called forth in an *ad hoc* manner testimonies, psychologically oriented (when it is interested in the mechanisms of reading and its individual variables) or sociologically oriented (when concerned with collective variables: social conditioning, the division of readers into “groups”, the place of reading in social practice and so on), often using quantitative evaluation techniques in common with those of biblioeconomy and with close applicative correlations in literary didactics; a historical-literary research, based on reception testimonies as well, yet interpreted either as being relevant for the received works or for the functioning of the “system of literature” in which the textual aspect represents merely a component that can no longer assume primacy; an investigation of reception consequences, either in the literary sphere (influences, the reversed connection reception-creation for the readjustment of authorial strategies and so on), or in the psycho-sociological sphere, approaches based on distinct and varied methodologies that reach, with their extra-literary openness, spaces of wide culturological interest. It is almost superfluous to mention that these versions, already difficult to distinguish in theory, constantly overlap in practice.

What is the stance of the “aesthetics of reception” – which for historical relevance, has been the focal point of my presentation so far – in relation to these alternatives? From the start, eclectic. In fact, its advocates do not even seem to be interested in defining a peculiar field of research, but in pinning down and tackling the constellation of problems the solution of which can be foreseen in shifting the

center of interest towards reception and receiver. Thus, in this flexible frame, multiple approaches coexist: theoretical versions and applied studies concerned with the author-reader relation (the traditional domain of “influences”), the development of the work as “potential of meaning”, in the succession of its concretizations (a reminder of “critique of criticism”), the social-formative function of literature (the study of “consequences”), encoding the answer in the work (the “aesthetics of effect”) and so on. In terms of epistemological options, the reception-effect dichotomy proves to be simplistic if not distorting. Jauss returns to this issue after the debates brought about in the early 1970s, with a series of specifications intended to justify the validity and appropriateness of the distinction:

In the analysis of the experience of the reader of the ‘community of readers’ of a given historical period, both sides of the text-reader relation (effect [*Wirkung*] as the element that is conditioned by the text and reception [*Rezeption*] as the element of concretization of meaning that is conditioned by the addressee) must be distinguished, worked out, and mediated if one wishes to see how expectation and experience mesh and whether an element of new significance emerges. These two horizons are the literary one, the one the work brings with it on the one hand, and that of his everyday world which the reader of a given society brings with him on the other. Because it is derivable from the work itself, the construction of the literary horizon of expectation is less problematic than is that of the social one which, as the context of a historical life-world, is not being thematized (Jauss 1982: 29).

As it can be easily noticed, the clarifications intended by Jauss touch upon central notions and problems of the historical-literary approach he proposed. He has been quite rightfully accused, for instance, of the fact that the notion of “horizon of expectation” is vaguely defined and that the possibilities of its “objectivization” proposed by Jauss appear to lead towards methodological contradictions:

As long as he insists on the possibility of a ‘reconstruction of the horizon of expectation’ and sets out to accomplish this reconstruction with evidence or signals from the works themselves, he is going to be measuring the effect or impact of works against a horizon that is abstracted from those works (Holub 1984: 61-62).

The binominal *Wirkung/ Rezeption* justifies the introduction of an additional topic of discussion in order to avoid circularity. However, ambiguities persist. Is it possible to reconstruct the interliterary horizon of expectation at the level of individual works or reading priorities, literary norms and conventions shared by a certain community, such as those already known relating to the genre, form and theme of literary works or those of the opposition between poetic and practical language initially mentioned by Jauss (1975: 130)? Studying the texts themselves proves to be an insufficient method for deciding to what extent the readers of a certain period actually shared such knowledge, conventions or norms, whether

homogeneous or irregular. The distinction between intraliterary and extraliterary does not overlap with the one between the focus on the text and the focus on the reader. The idea that the text “expresses” its own horizon of expectation, which is therefore accessible in an unmediated form to the reader must also be regarded with apprehension. How should this horizon of expectation be understood? As being exclusively text-given, as a set of initial, informative landmarks, as a succession of reading indications, as an ongoing negotiable offer of participation? Different models of literary texts will arrogate different horizons of expectation. In the case of the individual act of reading, we are dealing with a system of expectations with its own dynamics. Similarly, Mandelkew (1974a: 90) proposed the expansion of the content and the pluralization of the horizon of expectation, distinguishing between “files of contrast” (*Kontrastfolien*) such as expectations regarding the period, author or work. The identification of *effect* and *reception* with *moments* of the concretization of the work’s meaning is also debatable. Their successive arrangement would contradict the conditionings established by Jauss. In the analysis of reception *as process*, the “effect” is perceived as being the last, “post-receptive” phase (Beilfuss 1987). It is conditioned by reception, not by the text. It is a psychological terminology that is evidently different from Jauss’ intentions and brings about even more confusion. The title of the Constance group, *Rezeptionsästhetik* is also misleading. Jauss does not consider the above mentioned binominal in order to defend the choice of one term over the other, but in order to establish a connection – although a frail and problematic one, as we have seen – between what seems to be rather “heuristic fiction” (*Wirkung*) and what describes itself rather as empiric investigation (*Rezeption*). Iser, the second key figure of the “aesthetic of reception” believes that his endeavor in *The Act of Reading* “is to be regarded as a theory of aesthetic response (*Wirkungstheorie*) and not as a theory of the aesthetics of reception (*Rezeptionsästhetik*)” (Iser 1978: X). The argument is strikingly similar to that of Jauss: “A theory of response has its roots in the text; a theory of reception arises from a history of the readers’ judgments” (*idem*). Iser finds the translation of the German term *Wirkung* problematic because it care “comprises both effect and response” (Iser 1978: IX, note 1). Thus, the Constance School paves the way in two main directions: on the one hand, it reconsiders the “system of literature” from a pluridimensional perspective, according to historical coordinates, focusing on the area of reception (particularly Jauss), on the other hand, it reconsiders the aesthetics of effect from a new perspective, analyzing the relationship between the work and the receiver (particularly Iser). The second direction is usually considered to be defining for the “aesthetics of reception” in a narrow sense (in opposition to empirical research).

Von allen Rezeptionstheoretikern vertritt Wolfgang Iser am entschiedensten die Konzeption der *Rezeptionsästhetik*. Diese ist am impliziten, im Text verbogenen Leser

interessiert, im Unterschied zur *Rezeptionsgeschichte*, die sich mit dem *realen Leser* befaßt (Reese 1980: 39, *passim*).

The study of reception in Romania (1970-1990)

In 1960s Romania, a similar preoccupation to that of DRG with the “valorification of literary heritage” starts to take shape with the essential purpose of lifting the ban (be it total or partial) with respect to pre-war authors.

The ideological arguments of the perspectives involved in the debate can be considered predominantly circumstantial. By means of bringing back into circulation the authors banned in the proletcultist decade a great connection with the pre-war literary model is formed. In contrast with the persistence of the Marxist thought-frame in DRG, the tendency to renounce the ideologization of literary study, which finds fertile ground in the immanentist approach towards the text. The principle of “aesthetic autonomy” has suited not only the proneness to rehabilitate the “true nature” of aesthetic experience, but also the defensive stance with respect to the pressures and threats of political authorities in the sphere of culture. The literary works of the past have been predominantly perceived either in terms of their “perennial” value and significance or from the perspective of their openness towards aesthetic benchmarks and contemporary interpretative strategies. The 1970s series that presented classic writers of Romanian literature as “our contemporaries” is illustrative of this tendency. The preoccupation with the “initial context” of literary communication limits itself to the routine factology of academic historiography. The “temporal distance” or historical development of the potential of meaning of literary works do not raise hermeneutical problems. The separation of culture from the circumstantial and its placement in a universalist, ahistorical perspective reaches a high degree of awareness through the “Păltiniş School” established by C. Noica and the public debates that the latter generates, engaging a great number of intellectuals from the sphere of the humanities.

Once again, unlike the DRG, where reception controversies have brought about, even by means of recoil, reflections upon the chances of emancipation of the reading public within a communist system, in Romania, cultural “elitism” was considered by many intellectuals to be the only viable stagey, opposing the “dilettantism” promoted by the official mass cultural programs, such as “Cântarea României” (“Chant of Romania”). The most widely accepted position was that of “passive resistance”, of “surviving through culture” regardless of the levelling pressures of the culture produced by controlled and politically manipulated masses. This option is also explained through the fact that the officials’ tolerance with respect to public cultural goods was generally inversely proportional with the audience they attracted. The control was more stringent in the case of television than in the case of cultural journals; in turn, the latter were more closely monitored

than publishing houses and so on and so forth. The book *of* literature was considered to be potentially more dangerous than the book *about* literature.

Another factor worthy of being taken into consideration is the fact that at a certain point, the power either failed or renounced the persuasion attempts made via propagandistic instruments that were the object of its influence and the basis for considering literature highly significant in the 1950s. Gradually, propaganda assumed the function of “zero substitute”, encouraging the type of cultural product that – through its mere presence in the institutionalized mechanisms of value circulation – was meant to obstruct the rise of potential factions. The anticipated “effect” leaned towards *brain washing*: unable to induce or maintain favorable convictions, the attempt was to use permanent and concrete repetitions of various expressions lacking in coherence in order to empty the very system of convictions. Therefore, both intellectual elites and political-ideological officialdom have simultaneously, although often for opposite reasons, ignored the reality of the receiving public.

A breach in the supremacy of literary “immanentism” was shaped later on by the younger, 1980s generation of writers. They proclaimed (and often practiced) bringing literature back “into the street”, highlighting communication techniques (irony, textualism, “denudation of the procedure”), emphasizing and refining authorial ethos (through ironical doubling, metacommentary and self-disclosure, through the introduction of the author as agent in the text, as witness or even as the latter’s resultant, as “scriptural person”) and, symmetrically, the qualitative and quantitative potentiation of the role of the reader (through the value attributed to demythicizing phrases that trigger a more intense, deliberative participation on the part of the reader, but also through an enhanced “straightforwardness” of discourse intended to expand its accessibility – poetry without metaphors, apprehension towards the “esotericism” and “metaphysics” of lyricism) and so on.

The 1980s generation made manifest the irritability of the defenders of the *status quo* in Romanian cultural policy. For instance, the obstinacy with which the journal “Săptămâna” (“The Week”) led a campaign to infamize and annihilate the young poets and their supporters in the field of literary criticism is significant in this respect. This discriminating attitude with respect to the young poets reverberated in the editorial system as well. For example, a rather confusingly formulated directive was issued so as to condition the right to one’s debut upon the bringing of proof... of a prior debut.

However, the immediate impact of the 1980s generation must not be overestimated. Its diffusion among the public audience remained rather limited. In addition, the academe have only remotely absorbed its innovative suggestions and have proven to be even less inclined to transfer them to the understanding of literature in general. The 1980s generation rather marks the beginning of a process in full swing.

The power in question – particularly from the middle of the ninth decade onwards – of the term “postmodernism” has also had a sensitizing effect upon the attempts of defining a new “concept” of literature.

In conclusion, the issue of reception has triggered a relatively dim interest in Romania, where the synchronization with Western approaches along these lines has been much feebler than in the case of formalism or structuralism, for example.

The “paradigm shift” detected and anticipated by Jauss in the late 1960s reverberated in Romania dimly and tardily. The studies on literary, historical and contemporary reception have not attracted any particular attention. The “intrinsic” approach maintained its supremacy until the late 1980s. However, a few exceptions can be mentioned. Silvian Iosifescu (1973, 1981) and Ion Vlad (1972, 1977) have discussed the act of reading and its importance for the knowledge of literature in a predominantly aesthetic form. Carmen Vlad (1982) has analyzed critical reading from a semiotic perspective. Nicolae Constantinescu (1985) has investigated the characteristic aspects of the reception of folk literature. In the field of the sociology of literature, reading and reception have been discussed in works such as those of Traian Herseni (1973), Constantin Crișan (1977, 1978, 1989) or Ion Vasile Șerban (1983, 1985). However, the majority of literary sociology studies have not focused primarily upon reception. The specialized knowledge that the authors possessed was more often than not particularly scant (Lukacs, Escarpit and Goldmann were sometimes the only mentioned recent sources; German and Anglo-American literary sociology were almost completely unknown). Such studies were generally theoretical and the only references to case studies were linked to questionnaires and surveys carried out in France that were many times extrapolated in a disconcerting manner upon the Romanian reading public. Sociology of reception studies based on Romanian field investigations have been published by Pavel Câmpeanu (1972, 1973) regarding the radio, television and theatre audiences and by Amza Săceanu (1977, 1979) with respect to the Bucharest theatre audience. “Sociological criticism” was apparently more appealing to Romanians since it was a method of literary text interpretation and hence, an “immanentist” approach, despite its concern with the relation between work and society. There have been translations of the works of L. Goldmann (1972) and Robert Escarpit (1974, 1980). Other key figures in the domain, such as Fügen, Schücking, Lowenthal or Leenhardt have been ignored. The literary sociology practiced in Romania gives the overall impression of amateurism and vaguely emancipated ideological conformism. Unfortunately, it has had to endure the handicap of a facile assimilation to “sociologism” that had impoverished and despicably distorted literary history and criticism over the sixth and seventh decades, creating the mainly unfounded reputation of a discipline that could not avoid the trammels of Marxist ideology. Unlike the DRG, Romanian intellectuals have rather rapidly abandoned Marxist philosophy on a large scale, reducing it to preliminary, protocolary quotations in most cases in which it persisted.

Presumably, political authorities have also agreed to the disposal of the knowledge imparted by the “fathers” of Marxist thought in favor of an ever more pronounced approach towards a personal dictatorship, with nationalist tinges.

The academe and literary criticism have not displayed particular interest with respect to the “aesthetic of reception” practiced by the Constance School. Only Jauss’ work has produced a rather louder echo. *Literaturgeschichte als Provokation der Literaturwissenschaft* was first published in Romanian in a fragmented version in the “Alma mater” student journal from Iasi, in 1975 and in full translation in “Caiete critice” (“Critical Notebooks”), as a supplement to the journal “Viața românească” (“Romanian life”) in 1980. Andrei Corbea translated Jauss’ later work, well known on a larger scale *Ästhetische Erfahrung und literarische Hermeneutik* in 1983.

Literaturpsychologie by Norbert Groeben, published for the first time in 1972 was introduced to the Romanian public in the translation of Gabriel Liiceanu and Suzana Mihalescu (1978). However, the openness achieved by this work with respect to the empirical research of reception was left without consequences. This was surely due in part to its very “technical” character and the insistence upon “scientific objectivity” – two approaches that were not very appealing to the humanistic intellectuals of the time.

History of reception works have been sporadically published in specialized journals (Cornea 1980: 58, 276). They are mainly focused on the analysis of critical reception. The traditional “critique of criticism”, abundantly present in numerous works of literary history, avoids theoretical and methodological matters. However, notable exceptions can be mentioned. *Regula jocului (The Rule of the Game)* by Paul Cornea (1980) reunites a series of studies on the sociology of reading and other domains of literary reception (literary success, the theory of influences, the theatrical audience and so on) applied to nineteenth century Romanian literature. The work offers excellent theoretical landmarks for the study of literary communication, refreshing the historiographical perspective with the help of methodological models that were less mentioned in Romania and discussing what used to be a mostly ignored issue. Florin Manolescu (1983) has made an in depth analysis of communicational strategies in the work of I.L. Caragiale. The journal “Cahiers roumains d’études littéraires” consecrated an issue (3/ 1986) to literary reception. Ecaterina Mihăilă published a monographic, theoretical work (1980) about poetic reception. A systematic, abundantly informative and comprehensive work on the theory of reading published by Paul Cornea (1988) marked an important tendency towards openness in Romanian literary studies.

Translated from Romanian by Andreea Paris

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LITERARY RECEPTION THEORIES: A REVIEW

(Abstract)

The interest in a contextualizing approach to literature is getting shape over the 1960s as a means of overcoming the dominant textual (and aesthetical) methodology or emphasis, of breaking away “from the formalist and New Critical emphasis on the autonomy of ‘the text itself’ toward a recognition (or a re-recognition) of the relevance of context, whether the latter be defined in terms of historical, cultural, ideological, or psychoanalytic categories.” (Suleiman – Crosman 1980: 5). In this paper I will consider exclusively the dynamics of reception theories between roughly 1970-1990. The reasons for which it seemed necessary to re-open this ‘case’ are twofold: firstly, to my knowledge Romanian literary culture still lacks a detailed introduction to the so-called ‘golden age’ of reception studies, an introduction that would cover both historical and theoretical aspects; secondly, and more important in my view: as we shall see in the final section of this paper, Romanian literary research, by its nature very prone, even obsessed to synchronize itself with Western theory, was not quite eager to absorb reception studies, especially in their German versions. After 1990, missing out certain stages suddenly brought our literary research to other topics of interest, very political ones, as for instance, cultural, gender, or postcolonial studies, etc. I strongly believe that a reassessment of this kind is still useful and necessary.

Keywords: Literary theory (1970-1990), Sociology of literature, Literary reception theories, Constance School, the study of reception in România (1970-1990).

O RETROSPECTIVĂ ASUPRA TEORIEI RECEPTĂRII (Rezumat)

Interesul pentru o abordare contextuală a literaturii se conturează în jurul anilor 1960, ca modalitate de depășire a metodologiei dominante textualiste (și estetice), de ieșire de sub tutela „accentului pus de către formalști și Noua Critică pe autonomia ‚textului în sine’, în direcția recunoașterii (sau a recunoașterii) relevanței contextului, indiferent că-l definim prin categorii istorice, culturale, ideologice sau psihanalitice” (Suleiman – Crosman 1980: 5). În acest studiu mă voi referi exclusiv la dinamica teoriilor receptării dintre anii 1970 și 1990. Redeschiderea „cazului” pare necesară din două motive: în primul rând, culturii literare românești încă îi lipsește o introducere detaliată pentru așa-zisa „epocă de aur” a studiilor de receptare, o introducere care să cuprindă aspecte deopotrivă istorice și teoretice; în al doilea rând, lucru și mai important, în opinia mea, așa cum vom vedea în partea finală a acestei lucrări, cercetarea literară românească, preocupată, prin natura sa, de ideea sincronizării cu teoria occidentală, nu s-a grăbit să asimileze studiile de receptare, mai ales în versiunea sa germană. După 1990, arderea anumitor etape a orientat cercetarea noastră literară înspre alte subiecte de interes, în speță politice, cum ar fi, de exemplu, studiile culturale, de gen sau postcoloniale. Cred cu convingere că o reevaluare de acest tip continuă să fie utilă și necesară.

Cuvinte-cheie: teorie literară (1970-1990), sociologia literaturii, teoriile receptării, Școala de la Constanza, ecouri ale teoriilor receptării în România.