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## REENACTMENTS OF “THE SECONDARY” – WITHIN AND BEYOND THE “LITERARY TURN”

Whether the wave of New Historicism has been symptomatic for a “political” and historical turn in literary studies, the apparently contrary direction of thought seems to be *the literary turn* in political and social thought and analysis. Such an interpretative turn, which emphasizes a literary approach to the knowledge of history and to political and sociological discourse, could be understood as a revival of several divergent cultural and textual tendencies. It is the cluster of such resistant literary and cultural forces that should be described, according to Virgil Nemoianu, through the discrete but multilayered concept of *the secondary*.

I will focus on several conceptual nuances which could enter into a hermeneutical dialogue; thus, they could become complementary modes of reinterpreting certain historical objectives of literary and aesthetic theory. These dynamic concepts are to be analyzed from the viewpoint of certain theoretical narratives, around which they seem to gather and nourish a few epistemological instruments and perspectives: *the secondary* (as defined by Virgil Nemoianu), *the political and historical turn* in literary studies (in this sense, New Historicism is a main critical perspective and direction of thought) and, conversely, the “*literary turn*” in political and social thought. Such comprehensive syntagms, which coagulate around important hermeneutical narratives of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and of the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, might prove relevant for reassessing the social and anthropological influence of literary theory and of aesthetic epistemology.

As a literary and cultural analyst, the Romanian-American Professor Virgil Nemoianu – a “travelling theorist” situated in-between cultures, as it were – proposes the notion of *the secondary*, a conceptual entity or a theoretical fiction that designates a series of cultural, social, but mostly literary attitudes, textual objects and phenomena, arguing that they form a dialectical opposition to *the principal*. The latter is somehow contained within the creative tension of *the secondary*. Literature symptomatically reveals the paradoxical power of the secondary, as well as the complementarity of the principal acts and driving forces of a society (political, economic, moral, religious, all of which constitute *centrality*), on the one hand, and the secondary cultural and aesthetic phenomena, on the other.

While elaborating his theory on the reactionary or, at least, subversive character of the secondary as compared to the dominance of the principal, Nemoianu has the merit of reevaluating a couple of aesthetic and epistemological concepts created by the Romanian philosopher of culture Lucian Blaga. The American professor invokes Blaga’s work *Cunoașterea luciferică* [*Luciferic*

*Cognition*], from 1933, and tries to restore the dialogical potential of Blagian ideas, their philosophical and aesthetic legacy, their power of intellectual irradiation from the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century up until the last decades thereof (Nemoianu's book was published in the United States, by the Johns Hopkins University Press, in 1989). Blaga's theory of *minus-knowledge* and of Luciferic cognition could be understood, in Nemoianu's view, in parallel with such moderately relativist and pluralist approaches as those of Thomas Kuhn, Nelson Goodman or Paul Feyerabend, or with Michel Serres's philosophy of the "multiple".

Lucian Blaga's theories of knowledge, graciously brought within the international circuit by Virgil Nemoianu, emphasize a specifically aesthetic treatment of philosophical discourse and an almost non-Western, rather Oriental mode of reflection (inspired by the Eastern-Orthodox branch of "negative theology"). The conceptual entities of his gnoseological system are mutually interrogating one another, as they are actually dwelling not so much on cognitive skepticism or relativism, but mainly on mystery, as a perpetually *creative* suspension of knowledge. The gnoseology and art philosophy of Blaga can be also analyzed through this retro-prospective revival, which actually means looking back upon some of his interpretative concepts from the moment of the "literary turn" that gained momentum in postmodern times, around the 1990's. The inclination of some important Western philosophers towards embarking on a quest for a literary perspective on social life and on moral dilemmas, and towards a narrative and metaphorical style, will be emphasized in the 1980's and 1990's. It will reinforce the place held by literary discourse and by the "life" of literary characters, relations, conflicts as points of theoretical reference within the humanities. This whole line of thought is represented, among others, by ethical philosophers like Martha Nussbaum (interested in Greek tragedy, or in Henry James's prose), or by skeptical hermeneuts (i.e., Stanley Cavell, with his huge interest in Shakespeare), or by "postfoundationalist" thinkers, such as the pragmatist Richard Rorty (for whom philosophy could be interpreted "as a kind of writing").

I aim to ascertain several new modes of employing the category of the secondary and to test its relevance up to this day. Certain sinuous arguments of literary theory could thus be revalued and a few metacritical tools could be tested. My argument will follow some critical reenactments of the *secondary* – and the dialogue, either subtle or radically polemical, or the rupture between the secondary and the principal – within the *literary turn* of the 1990's and then within the "digital turn" and the approaches indebted to "distant reading" (Franco Moretti) in the 2000's.

*The Secondary – between Dialogical Counterpoint and Ideological Control*

Throughout the final chapter of his book *A Theory of the Secondary. Literature, Progress and Reaction*, entitled “A Short Theory of the Secondary”, Virgil Nemoianu demonstrates how several important critical and theoretical movements and methodologies (Neo-classical philological studies, New Criticism, the Marxist and Neo-Marxist critique, structuralism and the psychoanalytical approach) arrive at a point where they renounce their pretence that literature should be forced to fit into their pre-defined patterns. And, consequently, these different interpretative strategies finally surrender to the subversive force of literature itself, to the recessive and secondary drives that hide within critical discourse:

Ultimately, the centripetal power of literature rests in the aspiration of discourse itself towards the status of literature, that is, towards the privileged enjoyment of liberty, self-referentiality, and a putatively inexhaustible substantiality as expressed in multiple meanings and textual openness<sup>1</sup>.

It is as if literary discourse were, in Nemoianu’s view, a kind of “anthropomorphic divinity” for ordinary discourse, one that hopes to reach that “paradisiac or utopian state” embodied in the sphere of the literary.

It appears that Nemoianu’s theoretical discourse itself testifies more than once to this particular kind of fascination, which helps the critic in his endeavor to construct a sort of lucid mythologization of the somehow mysterious core of literary aesthetics. There are many stylistic volutes and narrative structures that stand for the recipients of his critical arguments, along with metaphors and personifications of concepts. Among them, *the secondary* and *the principal* are the main metaphorically argumentative extensions and also the two protagonists of this theoretical odyssey.

In a chapter significantly entitled “The Dialectics of Imperfection: Girard, Blaga, Serres”, Nemoianu devotes a comprehensive interpretation to Blaga’s aesthetic epistemology, or, more precisely, to the specific Blagian mode of endowing aesthetic values with an epistemological power of their own. The gesture of integrating Blaga’s epistemology and aesthetic theory into the large cultural field of contemporary international debates is meant to reinforce the power of some almost marginal, but creative roads, where literary, philosophical and anthropological ideas meet, enter into dialogue and merge. The chance (or the innovative potential) of the marginal and apparently reactionary line of thought – or, better said, of *the secondary* – is sometimes to be found in the sheer mystery, in the ontological and epistemic uncertainty of the metaphysical Great Anonymous

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<sup>1</sup> See Virgil Nemoianu, *A Theory of the Secondary. Literature, Progress and Reaction*. Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989, p. 185.

(another syntagm of Blaga's, supposedly famous for the Romanian intellectual community and maybe for a few foreign scholars interested in quoting exotic references). Instead of a clarifying and "progressively" analytical reason, the Blagian *minus-knowledge* can offer a privileged insight into a *transcendent that descends* into this world, among us, like through aesthetic catharsis; instead of climbing up to the universals and to the general level of disembodied knowledge, it is expected to descend, to get down "on earth", into its contingency, in search for an intimacy with the world and for particularity.

The metaphorically revealing *minus-knowledge*, as it is reassessed by Nemoianu, takes part, this time, in a dialogical process of continuous reinterpretation, in a hermeneutics of cultural paradigms (especially those of the twentieth century, among the structuralist and poststructuralist approaches). A flexible and dynamic category such as *the secondary* allows for a hermeneutical narrative which concedes a privileged role to the digressive movements of the aesthetic as opposed to the straightforward progressive lines of thought. The latter actually endorse the dominance of different ideologies over literature.

The part to be played by literature would be, then, to recover that specific "material" which has been abandoned and devalued, to insert the otherwise neglected elements into language, and thus to trouble the self-satisfaction of the ordered and systematic progress. Concentrating on the secondary means resorting to strategies of postponement and to certain digressive changes and *détours* of the central, fast-forward movement within a cultural pattern. It seems that Nemoianu's theory develops, to a considerable extent, an ecological understanding of the field of literary studies and of their traditional, canonical humanistic "core". Literature and its aesthetically resistant and therefore "secondary" choices speak for the ontological value of human imagination, in dialectical opposition to doctrines of historical progress. This resistance of literature around its own aesthetic ontology is to be acknowledged in a period more and more filled by politicized interpretations and ideological transgressions of the aesthetic, on the one hand, and by an apparently dehumanizing or posthumanist digital approach on literariness (as in the case of the field of Digital Humanities), on the other.

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Nevertheless, one could argue that the secondary contains the risk of turning into the massive, overwhelming flow of the principal, and as such, it can take abusive dominance over the "material" that undergoes artistic transformation. One such case in which the principal takes over the artistic values and the creative intentions altogether is to be found in the politics of aesthetics developed by contemporary philosopher Boris Groys. In his book *The Total Art of Stalinism*, Groys demonstrates how the political leader symptomatically borrows the posture of a demiurgic artist and gains an almost aesthetic control over society. The control is exercised by the political man as if he became some sort of radical artist

that transforms, through dictatorship, the factual social scene, so as to make it correspond to his totalizing “artistic” vision.

Analyzing the cultural consequences of the Stalinist era in Russia, Groys gives us a critical framework through which to understand how the totalitarian views link the aesthetic element to the political. He clearly denounces the reasons why the aesthetic power exercised by the artist upon his material can be compared to the forms of political control over society:

When the entire economic, social, and everyday life of the nation was totally subordinated to a single planning authority commissioned to regulate, harmonize, and create a single whole out of the most minute details, this authority – the Communist party leadership – was transformed into a kind of artist whose material was the entire world and whose goal was to ‘overcome the resistance’ of this material and make it pliant, malleable, capable of assuming any desired form<sup>2</sup>.

Yet, what Groys exposes as the artistic power to control a totality, to keep under surveillance a whole social entity, actually proves to be more or less the same with what Nemoianu called “the principal”, namely the political itself, which only temporarily takes on the mask of the aesthetical, as in the case of the “realist socialist” art: “The unordered, chaotic life of past ages was to be replaced, argues Groys, by a life that was harmonious and organized according to a unitary artistic plan”<sup>3</sup>. Whereas Nemoianu reserves to the domain of the secondary exactly the opposite of a thoroughly organized cultural field, recognizing that literature brings about a divergent and disruptive force, even a chaotic movement, a sometimes reactionary emotional and aesthetic disposition and, in any case, one which is resistant to any abusive ideological and social control.

*The Literary Turn – the Values of Contingency, Particularity, Fragility*

I once again invoke a metaphorical assertion from *A Theory of the Secondary*, according to which literary discourse would be a kind of “anthropomorphic divinity” for ordinary discourse. Along the same line of thought, the recent revaluations of the field of literary studies bring forth diverse debates around the anthropological and the trans-aesthetic role of literature within everyday life and within society. The directions of research embraced by several French theorists and essayists like Jean-Marie Schaeffer, Marielle Macé and William Marx, or by an American moral philosopher like Martha Nussbaum are relevant for an ethical and even an ecological turn within literary studies.

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<sup>2</sup> Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism. Avant-Grade, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond*. Translated from German by Charles Rougle, London – New York, Verso, 2011, pp. 3-13.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 3.

Beyond Nussbaum's more recent plea, in her book *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (2010), for the role of liberal arts in the formation of democratic citizens, her earlier volumes *The Fragility of Goodness* (1986) and *Love's Knowledge* (1990) make a strong case for the cultivation of virtues and capabilities that moral philosophy could find within the literary discourse (for instance, in the tragedy *Antigone*, or in Henry James's *The Golden Bowl*) or within "philosophical poetry". Also, her hermeneutical approach of Platonic dialogues such as *Symposium* and *Phaedrus* center upon the ethical dilemmas of characters like Socrates, Alcibiades or Phaedrus, involved both in passionate love stories and in a search for philosophical mastery, but also for responsiveness to the world and to the Other, for openness and receptivity, for the values of contingency, all through a "fusion of life and argument". Philosophy therefore seems to loosen some strongly argumentative ways in order to make place for the art of rhetoric and for ethical and even aesthetic preoccupations.

Thus, philosophical discourse achieves a specific touch of "vulnerability", meant to humanize the apparently disembodied rationale and to set off for an "intense scrutiny of particulars"<sup>4</sup>. Moreover, when she analyses Greek tragedy, Nussbaum focuses upon "the poetic features" of the text and its "metaphorical and emotive language"<sup>5</sup>, so that the clear philosophical line of argument does not disappear, but, on the contrary, attains a new level of accessibility, a "serene restraint" and a lucid persuasive power.

Another American ethical theorist and philosopher that significantly resorts to literary hermeneutics, Stanley Cavell, reveals in his turn the values of what he calls "acknowledgment", by focusing on a close reading of Shakespearean characters. His interpretation of *King Lear* is a hermeneutical construction that revolves around the values of cognitive skepticism. The process of merely *acknowledging* (instead of knowing by imposition) the "truth" residing in the Other (as Lear should have acknowledged, and tragically failed to do so, the truth about Cordelia's feelings for him) implies an ethical approach and openness towards alterity and difference:

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<sup>4</sup> Martha Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*. New York – Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1990, p. 148.

<sup>5</sup> See *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1986, p. 394.

We think skepticism must mean that we cannot know the world exists, and hence that perhaps there isn't one (a conclusion some profess to admire and others to fear). Whereas what skepticism suggests is that since we cannot know the world exists, its presentness to us cannot be a function of knowing. The world is to be *accepted*; as the presentness of other minds is not to be known, but acknowledged<sup>6</sup>.

As in the case of Lear, a case that Cavell considers symptomatic, the hero's tragic evolution is brought along by his dictatorial need to "know" each thought and emotion of Cordelia's, that is, to do away with her alterity, to destroy her ontological difference, while what he should have done instead was to mere *accept*, or *acknowledge* her existence.

We can therefore conclude that Cavell's skeptical "acknowledgment" of the world and of the Other within the world is relevant for the ways in which philosophical interpretation, in the line of Gadamerian hermeneutics, sides with the apparently secondary arguments. They ought to somehow disturb the forces of the principal and to resist them, so that *the principal* doesn't profess abusive or almost dictatorial modes of knowledge. No structuralist or poststructuralist theories pervade Cavell's writing, but on the contrary, his interest in writers such as Thoreau, Wordsworth, Poe, Ibsen, Emerson and, of course, Shakespeare allows him to arrive at an "accomplishment of inhabitation"<sup>7</sup>; that is, to "inhabit" the object of his argument<sup>8</sup>, not to appropriate it within predetermined theories, but to let it free as if it were a form of life, not captured in any interpretative boundaries. Cavell's moral philosophy and his hermeneutical skepticism bring forth the divergent aesthetic and literary values, which function as a counterpoint to the principal philosophical mode of rationalizing. The latter is then being swallowed, even if only temporarily, by "the proximity of poetry"<sup>9</sup>, by the *inhabitation* (and not at all distantiation or impersonal style) of theoretical discourse, and by "disowning" knowledge.

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<sup>6</sup> Cavell advances that there is a certain "truth of skepticism", and this is a main ethical concept of his, whose analytical potential is probed in the chapter "The Avoidance of Love", from his book *Disowning Knowledge in Six Plays of Shakespeare*. The quotation is taken from a new edition of his essays on Shakespeare, namely from *Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays of Shakespeare*. Updated edition. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 95.

<sup>7</sup> In his essay "Thinking of Emerson", from *The Senses of Walden*, Cavell maintains that "Emerson's and Thoreau's relation to poetry is inherently their interest in their own writing... I do mean their interest in what we may call their poems, but their interest in the fact that what they are building is writing, as it realizes itself daily under their hands, sentence by shunning sentence, the accomplishment of inhabitation, the making of it happen, the poetry of it". See *The Senses of Walden*. An Expanded Edition. San Francisco, North Point Press, 1981, p. 134.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>9</sup> In analyzing Cavell's interest in literature and music, and Danto's views on art, literary theorist Gerald L. Bruns argues that their theories of interpretation recognize the "proximity of poetry". See Gerald L. Bruns, *Tragic Thoughts at the End of Philosophy. Language, Literature, and Ethical Theory*. Evanston, Illinois, Northwestern University Press, 1999, pp. 147-163.

*Progressive and “Reactionary” Forces within the Digital Turn in the Humanities*

In an article on Moretti’s revolutionary method of literary analysis, “distant reading”, journalist and essayist Kathryn Schulz comments upon the pretention of digital analysis, as it is practiced and conducted by the Professor from Stanford University, to be taken for a science. Consequently, Franco Moretti considers, instead, that traditional qualitative literary analysis is a “theological exercise”. Still, Schulz warns about the methodological traps and the paradoxical premises of this new myth of digitalization. The digital analysis of literary texts runs the risk of becoming yet another type of “theological” perspective: “There will always be some people for whom new technologies seem to promise completeness and certainty, and Moretti, enthusing over the prospect of “a unified theory of plot and style,” is one of them. Literature, he argues, is “a collective system that should be grasped as such.” But this, too, is a theology of sorts — if not the claim that literature is a system, at least the conviction that we can find meaning only in its totality”<sup>10</sup>. If we are to resort once again to Nemoianu’s duality of concepts, then the Digital Humanities’ methods tend to become *the principal*, supposedly more scientific and progressive ways of doing literary research, whereas all the other approaches (whether neo-classical textual studies, or poststructuralist perspectives) would classify as *secondary*.

One of the adepts of textual digital analysis within the humanities, Scott Kleinman points to the strange “metaphysical” character of such methodologies, which extract patterns from texts and thus detect digital “ghosts” from beyond their discursive context:

Lexomics (and similar approaches) unlinks language from its context – a problem for many scholars of the materialist bent, myself included. If there is a way to factor context back what would that mean for our understanding of the materials we study? Does working with only words and numbers mean that the fingerprints we detect are really just digital “ghosts”, haunting the texts from which they are extracted but without a way to engage with the material world?<sup>11</sup>.

By constructing “dendrograms” (tree diagrams) and other visualisations of textual structures, the digital approaches arrive at a paradoxical decontextualisation of literature. A strange step within the digital humanities

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<sup>10</sup> Kathryn Schulz, “What is Distant Reading?”, *The New York Times*, 24 June, 2011. See [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/26/books/review/the-mechanic-muse-what-is-distant-reading.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/26/books/review/the-mechanic-muse-what-is-distant-reading.html?_r=0), consulted on May 23, 2015.

<sup>11</sup> See Scott Kleinman, *Exploring Quantitative Methods in the Humanities: An Introduction*, article posted on July 26, 2012, at <http://scottkleinman.net/blog/2012/07/26/exploring-quantitative-methods-in-the-humanities-an-introduction/>, consulted on May 23, 2015.



research is, one can argue, that of freezing the flux of the literary object, as inside an insectarium, and then interpreting it in a static and somehow captive way, by placing its “live” figures and stylistic processes in dry charts and maps. Quantitative analysis, with its search for graphs, maps and, as it were, “ghosts” of different literary relations, conflicts, characters, displays the visual transposition of an otherwise discursive form of art. In their turn, the older qualitative methods of doing close literary analysis, as well as cultural and theoretical criticism, are often anthropological and identity-centered studies, in which one can infer the “anthropomorphic divinity” (to invoke Nemoianu’s syntagm) that resides in literature.

The secondary, as a travelling and multileveled notion, remains apparently marginal, as it reverberates more in a cluster of conceptual nuances or attunements, than in ideological statements. It can therefore offer a generous sphere of textual and metatextual meanings, whereby to rename the need for singularity, for literary embodiment, instead of mere disembodied graphs or “dendrograms” of lifeless literary relations. The part played by the secondary or aesthetic drives of literature is to otherwise restore it to its own body, to its own materiality and immanent flux of textuality. It is as if – going back to Nussbaum’s interpretation of *Antigone* in her *Fragility of Goodness* – the self-sufficient “cityship” of Creon had to open up one more time to “contingency”, to the fundamental “value of community” and, last but not least, to an ethical, albeit aesthetically based, experience.

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REENACTMENTS OF “THE SECONDARY” – WITHIN AND BEYOND THE  
“LITERARY TURN”*(Abstract)*

The paper focuses on several conceptual nuances which I consider that could enter into a hermeneutical dialogue and, thus, they could become complementary modes of reinterpreting certain topics of literary and aesthetic theory. These dynamic concepts are to be analyzed from the viewpoint of certain theoretical narratives, around which they seem to gather and to nourish a few epistemological instruments and perspectives: *the secondary* (a concept proposed by a “travelling theorist”, situated in-between cultures, Virgil Nemoianu), *the political and historical turn* in the literary studies (in this respect, New Historicism being a main critical perspective and direction of thought) and, conversely, the “*literary turn*” in political and social thought. Such comprehensive syntagms, which coagulate around important hermeneutical narratives of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and of the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, might prove relevant for reassessing the social and anthropological influence of literary theory and of aesthetic epistemology. My argument will follow some critical reenactments of the *secondary* – and the dialogue, either subtle or radically polemical, or the rupture between the secondary and the principal – within the *literary turn* of the nineties and then within the “digital turn” and the approaches indebted to “distant reading” (Franco Moretti) in the years 2000.

*Keywords:* the Secondary, the Literary Turn, the Digital Turn, Virgil Nemoianu, Martha Nussbaum, Stanley Cavell.

NOI PRELUCRĂRI ALE „SECUNDARULUI” – ÎN CADRUL ȘI DINCOLO DE  
„MUTAȚIA LITERARĂ”*(Rezumat)*

Lucrarea se axează asupra mai multor nuanțe conceptuale, care consider că ar putea intra într-un dialog hermeneutic și, prin urmare, ar putea deveni moduri complementare de reinterpretare a unor obiecte ale teoriei literare și estetice. Aceste concepte dinamice vor fi analizate din perspectiva unor narațiuni teoretice, în jurul cărora ele par să se adune și astfel să ajute la crearea câtorva instrumente epistemologice: *secundarul* (concept propus de către „teoreticianul călător”, aflat la granița dintre culturi, Virgil Nemoianu), cotitura sau mutația politică și istorică în studiile literare (în această privință, *New Historicism/ Noul istorism* fiind principala perspectivă critică și direcție de gândire) și reversul său, „the Literary Turn”, cotitura sau mutația literară a gândirii politice și sociale. Astfel de sintagme cuprinzătoare, care coagulează în jurul unor narațiuni hermeneutice importante ale secolului al XX-lea și ale primului deceniu al secolului XXI, s-ar putea dovedi relevante pentru reevaluarea influenței sociale și antropologice a teoriei literare și a epistemologiei estetice. Argumentația mea va urmări câteva reconstituiri ori prelucrări critice ale *secundarului* – precum și dialogul, fie subtil, fie radical polemic, sau chiar ruptura între *secundar* și *principal* – în cadrul a ceea ce s-a numit „mutația literară” a teoriei anilor nouăzeci, iar apoi în cadrul unei mutații digitale și a abordărilor îndatorate unei „lecturi critice distanțate”/ „distant reading” (Franco Moretti), în anii 2000.

*Cuvinte-cheie:* secundarul, mutația literară, mutația digitală, Virgil Nemoianu, Martha Nussbaum, Stanley Cavell.