

POLITICAL FICTION OR FICTION ABOUT POLITICS. HOW TO OPERATIONALIZE A FLUID GENRE IN THE INTERWAR ROMANIAN LITERATURE

What's in a Genre?

A reader of contemporary genre theories is compelled to conclude that, one way or another, the idea of literary class has managed a narrow escape from obsolescence. Conceptual maximalism fell behind the pragmatic call to respond to a global cultural environment for which the task of grouping, structuring, organizing, labelling remains vital for a long list of reasons, of which marketing policies are not to be forgotten. The modern story of the field has seen many twists and turns. After some theories of genre evolutionism – derived more or less from Darwinism – consumed their heyday in the 1890s–1920s¹, Bakhtin (1937) took a decisive step toward a “historical poetics”, before Wellek, Warren (1948), Northrop Frye (1957), and Käte Hamburger (1957), and, later on, Gérard Genette (1979), Alastair Fowler (1982), or Jean-Marie Schaeffer (1989) returned to self-styled mixtures of formalism and historicism².

The study which pushed forward the scholarship in the field was, surprisingly or not, a fierce deconstruction of the “madness of the genre”, perceived as a self-defeating theory and practice of classification, highly necessary and utterly impossible at the same time. In his usual paradoxical manner, Derrida (1980) construes the relationship between the individual work and its set as one of

¹ See, for instance: Ferdinand Brunetière, *L'évolution des genres dans l'histoire de la littérature*, Paris, Hachette, 1890–1892; Albert Thibaudet, *Le liseur de romans*, Paris, G. Crès et Cie, 1925; Viktor Shklovsky, *О теории прозы [On the Theory of Prose]*, Москва, Издательств о “Федерация”, 1925. A later retake of the subject is Paul Van Tieghem, “La question des genres littéraires”, *Helicon*, 1938, 1, pp. 95-101.

² See M.M. Bakhtin, “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel” (1937), in *The Dialogic Imagination. Four Essays*. Edited by Michael Holquist. Translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, Austin, University of Texas, 1981, p. 84; René Wellek and Austin Warren, “Literary Genres”, in *Theory of Literature* (1948), London, Jonathan Cape, 1954, pp. 235-248; Northrop Frye, “Fourth Essay. Rhetorical Criticism. Theory of Genres”, in *Anatomy of Criticism. Four Essays* (1957), Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1973, pp. 243-340; Käte Hamburger, *Die Logik der Dichtung*, Stuttgart, Ernst Klett Verlag, 1957; Gérard Genette, *Introduction à l'architexte*, Paris, Seuil, 1979; Alastair Fowler, *Kinds of Literature. An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1982; Jean-Marie Schaeffer, *Qu'est-ce qu'un genre littéraire*, Paris, Seuil, 1989. For a synthetic review of Hamburger, Genette, Schaeffer, or Compagnon's contributions, see Marc Lits, “De l'importance du genre en culture médiatique”, *Belphégor. Littérature Populaire et Culture Médiatique*, 3, 2003, 1, <https://dalspace.library.dal.ca/handle/10222/47672>. Accessed October 11, 2020.

“participation without belonging – a taking part in without being part of”, due to the interpretive indetermination of the literary text. This turns the boundary of the set into “an internal pocket larger than the whole”³. Derrida’s challenge of the static core-periphery mapping draws attention to the margins as productive spaces where genres interact to merge into a system, functioning as a whole embedded in changeable historical frameworks. The competition between genres results in shifting hierarchies in time, but also in genres that continuously adjust themselves in order to become “fitter to survive”, so that their definitions fluctuate and class-gatherings rely more on “family resemblances”⁴. It is telling that the quantitative formalist experiments conducted by the Stanford Literary Lab operate with functional linguistic parameters rather than with conceptual descriptions, while Moretti charts his famous history of novelistic genres of the 18th–19th centuries without providing definitions of any kind⁵.

Is Political Fiction a Literary Genre?

The helter-skelter⁶ of what is improperly called the genre system is due to the heterogeneity of the criteria involved, in different times and places. In what concerns fiction, we can count realist, modernist, postmodernist, but also epistolary, graphic, children, adult, autobiographical, historical, gothic, silver-fork, mystery, thriller, romance, steampunk, picaresque, pastoral, psychological, fantasy, or Sci-Fi novels, depending on the clustering traits taken into consideration (style, structure, medium, theme, plot, characters, period, readership a.s.o.).

For some theorists, not just *any* designation qualifies as a genre. For example, Wellek and Warren have provided a negative answer to the question highlighted in the subtitle above, listing derisively the political novel – together with the “ecclesiastical novel”, “the novel of factory workers”, “the novel of the Oxford

³ Jacques Derrida, “The Law of Genre”, *Critical Inquiry*, 7, 1980, 1, pp. 59, 81.

⁴ Without attempting to provide a systematic account of recent genre theories, I list the works that helped me shape my synthetic argument: Ralph Cohen, “History and Genre”, *New Literary History*, 17, 1986, 2, pp. 204-205 (a reassessment of Derrida’s 1980 article; the historicity of genre), pp. 215-216 (reshifting genre hierarchy); John M. Swales, *Genre Analysis*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990, p. 49 (“family resemblances”); Daniel Chandler, “An Introduction to Genre Theory”, *Visual Memory*, 1997, pp. 2-3, <http://visual-memory.co.uk/daniel/Documents/intgenre/>. Accessed October 11, 2020 (comment on the “family resemblances” between members of the same genre). In the same vein, Franco Moretti treats the novel as a “family of forms” in his study “The Novel: History and Theory”, in *Distant Reading*, London – New York, Verso, 2013, p. 166.

⁵ Literary Lab (Sarah Allison, Ryan Heuser, Matthew Jockers, Franco Moretti, Michael Whitmore), “Quantitative Formalism: An Experiment”, *Pamphlet*, 1, 5 January 2011, pp. 1-29, <https://litlab.stanford.edu/LiteraryLabPamphlet1.pdf>. Accessed October 11, 2020. Franco Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees. Abstract Models for Literary History*, London – New York, Verso, 2007, pp. 3-33. Moretti only lists the works from which he drew his periodization, giving no attention to definitions (pp. 31-33).

⁶ Or the “hodge-podge” (Literary Lab, “Quantitative Formalism: An Experiment”, p. 10).

Movement, Depiction of Teachers in the Nineteenth-Century Novel, Sailors in the Nineteenth-Century Novel, also Sea Novel” – among the classes “based only on subject matter”, able to provide “a purely sociological classification”. On the contrary, a *literary* classification should dwell on “the formalistic side” of the text. Jonathan Swift’s Hudibrastic octosyllabics make more of a genre than all the aforementioned motley bunch of labels, the authors contended⁷. However, even adhering to Wellek and Warren’s exclusive interest in the “formalistic” criteria, admitting or rejecting political fiction as a literary genre is a matter of debate, since tracing a firm line between “content” and “form” is highly problematic (in general and in particular, as we will see in the concluding remarks).

Another assault against the genre was launched by the French champions of *la nouvelle critique* and of *le nouveau roman*. For them, contesting the political novel meant challenging the mainstream institution of *le roman engagé* established earlier by the existentialists, and promoting their own group’s production in its stead. Barthes’ distinction between *écrivains* and *écrivants* (1960) served as a theoretical platform for a long-lived argument against the literariness of *le roman à thèse*. The opposition between the one who writes for literature’s sake (*l’écrivain*) and the one who writes for an end other than literature in itself (*l’écrivant*) gives birth to “the bastard type” of “*l’écrivain-écrivant*”, none other than the committed novelist, held responsible for accommodating a non-literary agenda in literature. Barthes compares him or her to Maître Jacques, Voltaire’s comic character who served either as a cook, or as a coachman, never being able to be both at the same time. The epitome of this type of writer, endeavouring pointlessly to resolve an insurmountable incompatibility, is J.-P. Sartre⁸. One year later, in his famous essay *Pour un nouveau roman* (1961), Robbe-Grillet targets once more committed literature, in which he identifies two subsets: (1) the socialist realist prose, in the service of the Zhdanovist propaganda; (2) the existentialist novel, associated with various versions of “humanism”. Both rely on the Marxist claim about the novel’s role in awakening political consciousness. On the contrary, Robbe-Grillet preaches, in the spirit of his group, the retreat within the realm of “artistic form”, where language suspends its referential insertion and signifies nothing but itself⁹. *Le nouveau roman* comes as a radical consequence of the modernist project, based on the principle of aesthetic autonomy.

In contrast with the French poststructuralist suspicion against political fiction, there is a relatively rich tradition of American literary studies treating the matter.

⁷ See the whole argument in René Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature*, pp. 242-243.

⁸ Roland Barthes, “Écrivains et écrivants”, in *Essais critiques*, Paris, Seuil, 1981, pp. 147-154. Benoît Denis connects the hybrid *écrivain-écrivant* to the practice of existentialist literature and to Sartre in particular, in his study *Littérature et engagement. De Pascal à Sartre*, Paris, Seuil, 2000, p. 21.

⁹ See Alain Robbe-Grillet, “On Several Obsolete Notions”, in *For a New Novel. Essays on Fiction*. Translated by Richard Howard, New York, Grove Press Inc., 1965, p. 41: “Once there appears the concern to signify something (something external to art), literature begins to retreat, to disappear”.

Two content-based definitions of the genre from the interwar period¹⁰ informed the most influential post-war scholarship¹¹. Putting pieces together, one can work out an all-encompassing “analytic” definition. So, the political novel chiefly deals with: i. ideology (in all its guises, from party propaganda to the relationship ideology-worldview-consciousness); ii. governance institutions (local, regional, national, international); iii. political acts (from lawmaking and lobbying to reforming and protesting); iv. the life of the political milieu (with the drawing room as one of the most attended *topoi*). Boyers (1985)¹² refers to the same set of traits in his book on the political novel since 1945, with a more precise focus on the

¹⁰ Here is Morris Edmund Speare’s answer to the question what is a political novel (in *The Political Novel: Its Development in England and in America*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1924, p. IX): “It is a work of prose fiction which leans rather to ‘ideas’ than to ‘emotions’; which deals rather with the machinery of lawmaking or with a theory about public conduct than with the merits of any given piece of legislation; and where the main purpose of the writer is party propaganda, public reform, or exposition of the lives of the personages who maintain government, or of the forces which constitute government. In this exposition the drawing room is frequently used as a medium for presenting the inside life of politics”. For H.A.L. Fisher (“The political novel”, *Cornhill Magazine*, 1928, 64, p. 25), the political novel is “the novel which chiefly concerns itself with men and women engaged in contemporary political life and discussing contemporary political ideas”.

¹¹ Irving Howe (in *Politics and the Novel*, New York, Horizon Press, 1957, p. 17) lays stress on the role of ideology in the genre: “By a political novel I mean a novel in which political ideas play a dominant role or in which the political milieu is the dominant setting”; or, a couple of pages later (*Ibidem*, p. 19), the political novel is “the kind in which the *idea* of society [...] has penetrated the consciousness of the characters in all of its profoundly problematic aspects, so that there is to be observed in their behaviour, and they are themselves often aware of, some coherent political loyalty or ideological identification”. On the other hand, Joseph L. Blotner (*The Political Novel*, New York, Doubleday and Co. Inc., 1955, p. 2) focuses on “political phenomena”, or “political acts”: “Here a political novel is taken to mean a book which directly describes, interprets, or analyzes political phenomena. Our prime material is the politician at work: legislating, campaigning, mending political fences, building his career. Also relevant are the people who influence him: his parents, his wife, his mistress, the girls who jilted him, the lobbyist who courted his favour. The primary criterion for admission of a novel to this group was the portrayal of political acts, so many of them that they formed the novel’s main theme or, in some cases, the major theme”. In his 1966 book (*The Modern American Political Novel. 1900–1960*, Austin – London, University of Texas Press, 1966, p. 8), Blotner tries to refine his definitions, though qualifiers like “literal”, “functional”, or “conventional” can hardly shed light on the meaning of the key-terms: “[...] ‘political’ is here defined in a very literal and functional sense. The subject of these works [...] is also primarily political. Politics is not merely a secondary interest. These novels deal with the overt, institutionalized politics of the office holder, the candidate, the party official, or the individual who performs political acts as they are conventionally understood”.

¹² Robert Boyers (*Atrocity and Amnesia. The Political Novel since 1945*, New York – Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1985, p. 9) quotes Howe extensively when listing the traits of the political novel: “ideas have a ‘kind of independent motion’ and become ‘active characters’”; “political intrigue is more than a backdrop”; “characters ‘regard their personal fates as intimately bound up with social and political arrangements’”; the political novel attempts “to project a common world, that is more than a series of isolated tableaux, images, or emblems”. Moreover, “the determinate goal toward which the various elements tend will have something to do with ideas about community, collective action, and the distribution of power” (*Ibidem*, p. 16).

management of power. Despite their different ideological biases, the theories of these scholars converge in their main tenets.

Almost a decade later, Susan Rubin Suleiman makes a liberal and unpatronizing reassessment of the French *roman à thèse* of the 20th century, producing her influential definition:

A *roman à thèse* is a novel written in the realistic mode (that is, based on an aesthetic of verisimilitude and representation), which signals itself to the reader as primarily didactic in intent, seeking to demonstrate the validity of a political, philosophical, or religious doctrine¹³.

The main problem with this book, specified in its first paragraph¹⁴, is equating *le roman à thèse* with the ideological novel, which results in narrowing the scope of the latter to old-school realism and didacticism, an anachronism for the timespan considered by the author. Actually, between the Dreyfus Affair and the beginning of WWII, the ideological novel meandered from the “monological” to the “pulverized”¹⁵ meaning, taking part in more than one modernist literary experiment, though without ceasing to be ideological. It happened not only in the “major” culture of France (where writers like André Malraux, Jean-Paul Sartre, Pierre Drieu la Rochelle, Louis Aragon, and Robert Brasillach cut new narrative paths into European fiction), but also in semi-peripheries like Romania (with authors like Mircea Eliade, Mihail Sebastian or Gherasim Luca, attuned to the new trends and willing to upgrade the domestic repertoire). However, leaving aside the perplexing choice to consider *le roman à thèse* and the ideological novel as synonyms, Suleiman’s research is instrumental in introducing the genre to the updated toolkit of narratology, handled with both discretion and precision.

Stuart A. Scheingold’s research complements Suleiman’s, in that it covers some of the “blind spots” where Suleiman’s restrictive definition could not reach, i.e. the realm of political fiction rejecting any definite body of doctrine¹⁶. The theorist calls his subgenre the “novel of political estrangement” and finds in Kafka, the author of *The Trial*, its founding father. It is a novel about losing hope in the

¹³ Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Authoritarian Fictions. The Ideological Novel as a Literary Genre*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1993, p. 7.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 1-2. Here is the problematic first paragraph of the “Introduction”, where the author sketches a definition *sui generis* of the ideological novel: “This book is about novels with a clear ideological message – novels that seek, through the vehicle of fiction, to persuade their readers of the ‘correctness’ of a particular way of interpreting the world. I call such novels ideological, not in the broad sense in which we can say that any representation of human reality depends on, and in some way expresses, a more or less consciously defined ideology (in this sense, any work of fiction, indeed any work of art can be considered ideological), but in the more narrow sense in which we might call a discourse ideological if it refers explicitly to, and identifies itself with, a recognized body of doctrine or system of ideas”.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 22.

¹⁶ Stuart A. Scheingold, *The Political Novel. Re-Imagining the Twentieth Century*, Auckland, Continuum, 2010.

project of modernity as a whole, after the massacres of WW I, and, even more, after the Holocaust. The definition is inspired from the political essays by Zygmunt Bauman and Tony Judt about the “terrible 20th century”:

[N]ovels of political estrangement were, I argue, sown in the blood, the tragedy and the deceptions of World War I. Put another way, novels of political estrangement express a distrust of the political derived from and in tune with World War I, the subsequent global economic turmoil and totalitarianism of the left and the right in the 1930s¹⁷.

Historically, Scheingold splits this subgenre in two periods. In the interwar years, the novels voice a naive anti-war, populist and anti-capitalist creed, as in Ernest Hemingway and Erich Maria Remarque’s bestsellers. In the post-war decades, they undertake a more complex critique of modernity, as in the works of Joseph Heller, Kurt Vonnegut, or Pat Barker. Scheingold’s strength lies in disclosing the hidden planet of this subgenre, often overlooked by other critics, in which all public institutions and actors are out of sight and yet the political is subtly dissipated in the narrative, as an “absent presence”¹⁸. The vulnerability of his approach consists in the difficulty to draw the limits of his category. It is doubtful whether Hemingway and Remarque qualify as novelists of “political estrangement” or even as political novelists at all¹⁹. As a rule, frontiers involved in the attempt to divide and subdivide the genre are relative, if not ineffable.

After briefly reviewing a part of the American bibliography, we can conjecture that the most frequent two problems encountered – (1) defining and (2) mapping political fiction – often lead to a catch-22 situation. When piecing together an all-comprising definition, the outskirts of the genre fade away into the social²⁰ or into the war novel²¹. Conversely, focusing on a neatly circumscribed class of texts results in a truncated notion of ideological novel²². However difficult it may be to match the definition and the territory of the genre, giving it up altogether is not an option either, since political literature not only reflects ideology, but also reflects *on* ideology, as a resourceful critical discourse available since the mid-19th century. As a mediating form between entertainment and politics, the novel has taken part in bringing ideology closer to its audience, in publicizing mainstream or subversive bodies of doctrine and in effecting social and economic changes

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 8.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 19.

¹⁹ The author unconvincingly divides between the anti-war novels which are/ are not political (*Ibidem*, p. 27). For instance, he places Jaroslav Hašek’s *The Good Soldier Švejk* series in the latter category, while Hemingway and Remarque belong to the former.

²⁰ See Irving Howe, *Politics and the Novel*, p. 19, footnote: “I am quite aware that in practice it would often be impossible or not very useful to draw a sharp line of distinction between the political and social novels as I have here described them”.

²¹ See Stuart A. Scheingold, *The Political Novel*.

²² See Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Authoritarian Fictions*.

accordingly. We shouldn't overlook its societal impact, despite the blurry conceptual infrastructure it stands on: an impact which consists more in its *praxis* than in its *theoria*²³.

Interwar Romanian Prose: Political Fiction or Fiction about Politics?

As in most interwar European cultures, a strong prejudice against political fiction may be noticed in Romanian literary criticism. E. Lovinescu's *Istoria literaturii române contemporane* [*History of Contemporary Romanian Literature*] (1937) does not mention the genre in its chapters and subchapters dedicated to prose, though juggling with tags like "social satire", or "modernist, fantasist, pamphleteering, lyrical, abstract, essayistic, picturesque narratives"²⁴. The same disinterest is maintained in *Istoria literaturii române de la origini până în prezent* [*History of Romanian Literature from Its Origins to the Present*] (1941) by G. Călinescu, which operates with eclectic classification criteria²⁵, not to mention the less influential *Istoria literaturii românești contemporane* [*History of Contemporary Romanian Literature*] (1934) by N. Iorga. When Mircea Eliade publishes his novel *Întoarcerea din rai* [*The Return from Paradise*] (1934), the literary critic Șerban Cioculescu reviles the presence of ideological characters whose density in the novel results in an "unachieved fresco", and suggests the writer should turn back to the tools of the Balzacian, realist mode²⁶. A "good" writer should leave out of his work the foreign body of politics, and busy himself

²³ Christopher Harvie (*The Centre of Things. Political Fiction in Britain from Disraeli to the Present*, London, Unwyn Hyman Ltd., 1991, p. 2) raises doubts about the possibility of answering the theoretical questions incurred by the genre, but nevertheless pleads for its cultural importance: "But is there a proper genre to be investigated? If there is, what does it consist of? Why is it important? Is this for intrinsic reasons, or because of the politics of its own production and reception? I believe the importance of the genre lies in its *praxis*: it merged 'entertainment' and ideology to produce a useful political discourse for a traditional society intent on social and economic change, and then, more capriciously, it commented on and provoked its increasingly eccentric development in the twentieth century".

²⁴ E. Lovinescu, *Istoria literaturii române contemporane (1900–1937)* [*History of Contemporary Romanian Literature (1900–1937)*], București, Editura Librăriei Socec, 1937, pp. 406-407.

²⁵ G. Călinescu (*Istoria literaturii române de la origini până în prezent* [*History of Romanian Literature from Its Origins to the Present*]. Edition and preface by Al. Piru, București, Minerva, 1988, pp. 1056-1057) applies heterogeneous criteria to systematize his work: historical, generic, literary, aesthetic, cultural a.s.o. For instance, "the novel of the crowd" shares a chapter with "the novel of childhood" and "the Proustians", while the "ethnographic prose" stays together with the "poetry of paternity". The phrase "political fiction" is hardly used.

²⁶ See Șerban Cioculescu, *Opere. II. Aspecte literare contemporane. Viața lui I.L. Caragiale. I.L. Caragiale* [*Works. II. Contemporary Literary Aspects. The Life of I.L. Caragiale. I.L. Caragiale*]. Text selected and established, notes, comments, manuscript variants, and indexes by Bianca Burța-Cernat, Ștefan Firică și Alexandru Farcaș, București, Fundația Națională pentru Știință și Artă, 2019, pp. 455, 457. See also Cioculescu's other reviews of *Întoarcerea din rai* (pp. 949-951) and *Huliganii* [*The Hooligans*] (pp. 958-961).

with the “creation of characters”, the realization of which gives the measure of his talents. It is noteworthy that Eliade actually listens to the suggestion, remodelling his novel’s sequel *Huliganii* [*The Hooligans*] (1935) on the narrative template advised by the critic, and lowering the political stakes proportionally²⁷. The writer’s turning back from the ideological to the social “fresco”, “achieved” in the manner of a universal “human comedy”, illustrates the pressure exerted by the late-modern canon of aesthetic autonomy on the political fiction, pushed to the margins of art. The little *querelle* between Cioculescu and Eliade only typifies European modernism discrediting political literature as a contradiction in terms, or as an oxymoron²⁸.

The scarcity of studies dedicated to the interwar genre suggests that the prejudice lasted for a long time. Even a massive compendium like *Dicționarul cronologic al romanului românesc de la origini până la 1989* [*The Chronological Dictionary of the Romanian Novel from Its Origins to 1989*] (DCRR) hardly uses the tag, opting for canonical descriptions like “social”, “satirical”, and “psychological”, as is the case, or circumlocutory characterizations like “novel of the Jewish community and *milieu*”, “novel of the Romanian political reality”, or “social novel with a political bias”²⁹. The authors’ lexical choices mirror either an alignment to the modernist taboo, or a suspicion towards a notion insufficiently explained and demarcated so far.

Given the enduring tradition of obscuring the genre in the Romanian literary studies, researching the fiction concerned with politics is no easy task, and still something of a pioneering enterprise. Before mapping the interwar literary field in search for the “members” of the genre, the scholar should answer some basic questions: (1) is it really *useful*, in the first place, to single out a genre of fiction dealing with politics? Considering a positive answer, further questions arise: (2) how should we call it? Is the popular *denomination* “political fiction” appropriate? (3) what *criteria* should we apply to define it? and (4) what genre *configuration* should we expect in the Romanian literary system between the wars?

²⁷ Here is Eliade’s straightforward confession, in a 1936 interview (in “*Dosarele*” *Mircea Eliade* [*Mircea Eliade’s “Dossiers”*], vol. IV. Preface and text established by Mircea Handoca, București, Curtea Veche, 2000, pp. 125-126): “I wrote *Yoga* for the scientists, and *Huliganii* for the literary critics. I dare say, for instance, that I wrote *Huliganii* for the critic Șerban Cioculescu, who claimed that I couldn’t achieve an epic work. So, I gave up here, as much as I could, the ideological discursivity and the interior monologue, a literary technique which befitted my intentions”.

²⁸ Stuart A. Scheingold, *The Political Novel*, p. 6.

²⁹ See *Dicționarul cronologic al romanului românesc de la origini până la 1989* [*Chronological Dictionary of the Romanian Novel from Its Origins to 1989*], București, Editura Academiei Române, 2004, pp. 170, 318, 388, 396, 420, 486.

In the following, I will try to sketch my own answers after conducting some individual research which partially addressed the questions above³⁰.

(1) The usefulness of talking about such a class of texts is beyond doubt, if we consider the term “genre” with all due relativity. The epistemic advantage of archiving a whole genre/ category/ kind of literature resides in enabling us to see, beyond the canonical peaks, the mass of “the great unread”³¹. A cultural or literary researcher might be interested to note that, apart from the better known *De două mii de ani* [*For Two Thousand Years*] (1934) by Mihail Sebastian, *Huliganii* (1935) by Mircea Eliade, or *Gorila* [*The Gorilla*] (1938) by Liviu Rebreanu, a lot of other novels delved into the ideological debates sizzling in the interwar years, with the narrative toolkit available at that stage of literary development. After distance-reading a wide array of texts, he or she might gather relevant new data about the distribution of aesthetic orientations (realism, existentialism, expressionism, avant-garde, constructivism, surrealism), novelistic types (*roman à thèse*, *Bildungsroman*, psychological, autobiographical, essayistic, allegorical, utopian, dystopian, thriller), narrative patterns (3rd person/ 1st person/ limited/ neutral/ omniscient/ engaged/ camera-eye/ single-/ multiple-point-of-view narration, retrospection, interior monologue, stream of consciousness, collage, newspaper clips), literary spaces (“centre” vs. “periphery”, capital vs. “provinces”, urban vs. peri-urban vs. rural, “Western” vs. “Eastern”), etc.

But, maybe first and foremost, this researcher might want to scan for political stock-characters and political story-plots, in order to survey the political imagination existing in the literature of the epoch. To this effect, undoubtedly the best solution would be to run a complete scan of *all* the interwar fiction. However, given that such a solution is technically unfeasible for the current state of affairs in our literary studies, a database bringing together only those novels concerned with politics “to a higher extent than the others” (whatever that means) might come in handy.

The gains of accessing a large corpus of texts (bracketing what is canonically claimed of “literary value”) for myth-busting, re-imagining, i.e. finally de- and re-constructing literary and cultural histories, were emphasized by scholars like Margaret Cohen or Franco Moretti. The in-depth mapping of a literary class (like political fiction) is a preliminary step toward making statistics, compendia, dictionaries, histories, and other resources valuable for further research.

(2) Tradition proved that the denomination “political fiction” led to theoretical conundrums, even more so since the neo-Marxist contention that all literary

³⁰ It is the project *Political Fiction and the Question of Identity in the Interwar Romanian Literature*, *POLLIQUID*, (project no. 21/ 2018, supported by a grant of the Ministry of Research and Innovation, CNCS – UEFISCDI, PN-III-P1-1.1-PD-2016-0142, within PNCDI III.

³¹ Margaret Cohen, “Narratology in the Archive of Literature”, *Representations*, 108, 2009, 1, p. 59.

practices are inherently political³². Therefore, a prudent approach would be dodging the controversial phrase and using more or less versatile paraphrases, like “novels with political plotlines” or “novels that provide access to behind-the-scenes politics and political institutions”³³. The latter string of words describes, according to Scheingold, what most of the readers call “political fiction”.

I prefer the short label “novels about politics”³⁴, because it implies modesty and common sense in its theoretical claims. Primarily, genre should be understood as a “weak” rather than a “strong” concept, i.e. more of a marketing tag than an abstract-Aristotelian category. Hence, a literary text may take part in more than one genre (in line with Derrida’s idea about “participation without belonging”). I also find the label useful because it pinpoints the distinction between *the political* in general and *politics* in particular, i.e., roughly speaking, between what is related to power relations (which is... basically everything, at least since Foucault) and the organizational or institutional structures actively involved in the public sphere (parliament, government, presidency, local administration, militant NGOs, subversive groups, etc.). We use the word *politics* not in the “deep” acceptation taught in philosophy courses, but in the daily sense used in the media, when talking about “political news”, “life”, or “scandals”.

Therefore, the old and “naive” definitions provided by Speare, Fisher, Howe, and Blotner may result in a more efficient tool than expected.

(3) The criteria for membership in the class of “novels about politics” should be transparent and based on the occurrence of *overt political signifiers* like: (i) narrative political plots or subplots; (ii) political actors as stock characters; (iii) ideological reflection or debate. We may add that (iv) the participation of (i)-(iii) in the novel’s economy of significances should be relatively high. Obviously, the last provision concerns the most difficult parameter to quantify by human agency, so that a quantitative analysis of the texts under scrutiny could be a valuable assistance. We will return to this point in the concluding remarks.

In what regards (i), the *fabula* of a novel about politics includes narrative units like elections, negotiations, corruption acts, conspiracies, rallies, strikes,

³² For instance, for Terry Eagleton (in *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, second edition, Malden – Oxford – Victoria, Blackwell Publishing, 2005, p. 169), in a Marxist vein, “ideology might be said to be the class-struggle at the level of signifying practices. And since literature is certainly a signifying practice, it follows that it is one terrain on which the class-struggle is fought out”. The argument is developed further in his essay “Literature and Politics Now”, *Critical Quarterly*, 20, 1978, 3, pp. 66-67. To add a new level of complexity, literary metadiscourse is also inherently political: “There is, in fact, no need to drag politics into literary theory: as with South African sport, it has been there from the beginning”.

³³ This second paraphrase belongs to Stuart A. Scheingold in *The Political Novel*, p. 19.

³⁴ For Tom Kemme (in *Political Fiction, the Spirit of the Age, and Allen Drury*, Ohio, Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1987, pp. 4-5), the phrase holds a disparaging connotation as the “superficial” *ersatz* of the “political novel”, dealing with the “deep” problem of power and considered positively as “vital”, “organic”, “pure”, “elemental”, and “aesthetic”.

revolutions, riots, insurrections, terrorist attacks, reforming, law-making, bill-passing, lobbying, party switching, and other events related to the parliamentary, governance, or party life. An extended survey of the genre may eventually result in a repertoire of specific “functions” and “motives”, in the spirit of Veselovski, Tomashevski, Propp, or Doležel’s morphological poetics.

Stock characters embedded in political plotlines (ii) comprise corrupt or incorruptible politicians, demagogues, revolutionaries, spies, pacifists, humanitarianists, feminists, anti-feminists, anarchists, internationalists, bolsheviks, deviationists, unionists, jingoists, legionaries, fascists, political prisoners, side by side with other figures charged with significance in the political field, like financiers/ plutocrats/ lobbyists, magistrates, strikers and strike-breakers, rioting peasants and workers, prison guards, secret police officers, anti-Semites, pro-Zionists, pro-assimilists, “Jewish-gentiles”, etc. The weights of these categories vary in different historical epochs. For instance, the parvenu (“ciocoiul”), i.e. the plebeian and ruthless social climber stereotypical of a certain Balkanic self-image, dominates the advent of Romanian fiction (1860s–1910s), while the high-profile hero of the communist decades (1947–1989) is the activist, whether good or bad. The palette of political actors in the interwar period includes interesting figures like the feminist (*În cetatea idealului* [*In the Citadel of the Ideal*], 1923, by Dem. Theodorescu; *Marșul femeilor* [*The Women’s March*], 1933, by Alice Gabrielescu; *Tablete din Țara de Kutu* [*Sketches from the Kutu Country*], 1933, by Tudor Arghezi), the female spy (*Roșu, galben și albastru* [*Red, Yellow and Blue*], 1924, by Ion Minulescu; *Zvetlana*, 1930, by Octav Dessila; *Războiul micului Tristan* [*Little Tristan’s War*], 1937, by Mircea Gesticone), or the charismatic leader (*Un strigăt în noapte* [*A Scream in the Night*], 1933, by Adrian Hurmuz; *De două mii de ani* [*For Two Thousand Years*], 1934, by Mihail Sebastian; *Tigrii* [*The Tigers*], 1937, by Dragoș Protopopescu; *Furtuna* [*The Storm*], 1937, by Ovid Densusianu-Jr). However, by far the most visible character in terms of frequency but also of centrality in the plotline is the “politicianist”, who is neither a corrupt politician, nor a demagogue, but a bit of both. This local species, or rather its clichéd mythology in the interwar period, speaks about a whole range of conservative political thinking, from the nostalgia for the good-old boyar ruling class to the support for a far-right conservative revolution.

Strongly reviled by the modernist aestheticism, the passages of ideological reflection (iii) may take monologic or dialogic forms (both in a literal and in a Bakhtinian sense). *Les romans à thèse* deny the “polyphonic” principle *audiatur et altera pars* (Petru Arbore, 1924, *Glasuri în surdină* [*Silenced Voices*], 1927, and *Prietenii lui Miron* [*Miron’s Friendships*], 1934, all by Eugen Relgis), the essayistic novels, with sluggish narratives, make room to endless lectures on doctrine (*Calea calvarului* [*The Way of the Calvary*], 1935, and *Samson și noul Dagon* [*Samson and the New Dagon*], 1939, by A.L. Zissu), while novels claiming heteroglossia feature the distribution of “voices” typically meeting and duelling in

socializing spaces like the drawing room or the pub (*Întoarcerea din rai*, 1934, by Mircea Eliade; *Gorila*, 1938, by Liviu Rebreanu).

(4) The interwar fiction about politics enters a diversified and relatively mature cultural market, partially synchronized with its central models from Western Europe. The novelistic offer confronts a polarized audience, in terms of ideological orientations and aesthetic tastes, which explains the competition between a lot of narrative strategies and political agendas. Literary historiography talks about three macro-currents interacting in the national field (traditionalism, modernism, and avant-garde), each of them branching into further schools, orientations, and trends (from late-romanticism to dada and surrealism). In what regards ideology, the old representation of a bicoloured map, split between a reactionary and a modernizing camp³⁵, was replaced by the more accurate image of a six-block system: liberal, agrarian, traditionalist, antimodernist, far-right, far-left, with all the passing corridors in-between³⁶. The political fiction of the period has plenty of combinatorial options in store to merge politics and literature in products of entertainment more or less successful with the public or with the critics.

Diachronically, this rich spectrum comes after a long “dawning” period, starting in the 1860s, when the genre tried out various formulae: romantic realism (*Ciocoii vechi și noi* [*The Old and the New Parvenus*], 1863, by Nicolae Filimon), conspiracy mystery fiction (*Doritorii nebuni* [*The Crazy Dreamers*], 1864, by Dimitrie Bolintineanu), proto-Sci-Fi (*Finis Rumaniae*, 1873, by Al. N. Darius, *Spiritele anului 3000. Impresiuni de călătorie* [*The Spirits of the Year 3000. Travel Impressions*], 1875, by Demetriu G. Ionescu), or fictional autobiography (*Dinu Millian*, 1887, by C. Mille). Only one of them (Filimon’s parvenu story) represented a viable transplant, leading to Duiliu Zamfirescu’s classic “cycle of Comăneșteanu family”, before being canonized by E. Lovinescu as the *origo* of local realism. Taking in consideration all the other feeble streams emerging after 1900 (e.g.: the socialism and feminism of Sofia Nădejde and Smara, the commercial populism of Nicolae G. Rădulescu-Niger), the genre develops under the monopoly of the *roman à thèse*. Symmetrically, the spectrum will return to an even narrower monochrome after the installation of communism (1947), when Zhdanov’s code of socialist realist art production rules out any errancy from the “method of creation”. A few years before, during, and immediately after WW II (1940–1946), there is a “strange interlude” when the multiple aesthetic choices of the 1930s, still available, meet their ideological limitations due to the war and post-war censorship.

³⁵ Z. Ornea, *Tradiționalism și modernitate în deceniul al treilea* [*Traditionalism and Modernity in the Third Decade*], București, Eminescu, 1980, p. 315.

³⁶ Sorin Alexandrescu, “Modernism și antimodernism. Din nou, cazul românesc” [“Modernism and Antimodernism. Again, the Romanian Case”], in Sorin Antohi (ed.), *Modernism și antimodernism. Noi perspective interdisciplinare* [*Modernism and Antimodernism. New Interdisciplinary Perspectives*], București, Cuvântul, 2008, pp. 130-150.

Therefore, in this troubled 20th century local history, typical of a Eastern European culture crossing several dictatorships, the relatively liberal literary system of the interwar decades provides the safest environment for the development of a genre highly dependent on non-literary contexts, with a low degree of autonomy or “refraction to external resolutions”, in Bourdieu’s terms³⁷. The dispersion of the genre in the 1920s–1930s prompts us to leave behind the “centralized” model (i.e., bulking the greatest part of its members into a core). Actually, we can only find few texts to represent what Irving Howe used to call “pure” political fiction: *Rătăcire* [Errancy] (1923) by Aida Vrioni, *Conservator & C-ia* (1924) by N. Davidescu, *Tigrii* [The Tigers] (1937) by Dragoș Protopopescu, *Gorila* (1938) by Liviu Rebreanu and maybe a couple of others. “Authentic” or “elemental” novels about politics (i.e., concerned *only* with politics) are rather the exception than the rule, given the inherent eclecticism of the genre poetics. Moreover, the text unanimously acclaimed as the archetypical representative of its class³⁸, *Gorila*, is more of a novel of manners, considering that it places centre-stage the “politicianist” Toma Pahonțu, an old-fashioned parvenu in the spirit of Nicolae Filimon’s protagonist Dinu Păturică, while leaving out of focus the leader of the far-right movement Dolinescu, more consistent and more up-to-date as a political actor.

In exchange, many novels migrate to the boundaries of the genre, confirming Derrida’s contention about the margins turning into sizeable “pockets”, accommodating most of a class’ worth. Instead of looking at political fiction as a territory with exact borders, it is more productive to conceive of it as an open field dissolving into adjoining fields, giving way to one or more crossings. The majority of texts interfere with “social” fiction (*Domnul deputat... [Mr. M.P...]*, 1921, by V. Demetrius; *Purgatoriul* [Purgatory], 1922, 1938, by Corneliu Moldovanu; *În cetatea idealului* [In the Citadel of the Ideal], 1923, by Dem. Theodorescu; *Babylon*, 1924, by Radu Cosmin; *Fecior de slugă* [A Servant’s Son], 1932, by N.D. Cocea; *Pentr-un petec de negreață* [For a Little Black Bush], 1934, by N.D. Cocea; *Ciulinii Bărăganului* [The Thistles of Bărăgan], 1943, by Panait Istrati), war fiction (*Ne leagă pământul* [The Land Binds Us], 1926, by Victor Papilian; *Moartea unei republici roșii* [Death of a Red Republic], 1924, by Felix Aderca; *1916*, 1936, by Felix Aderca), judiciary fiction (*Apărarea are cuvântul* [The Defence May Speak], 1934, by Petre Bellu; *Cazul doamnei Predescu* [Mrs. Predescu’s Case], 1935, by Petre Bellu), fiction of religious “ideas” (*În credința celor șapte sfeșnice* [The Cult of the Seven Candlesticks], 1933, by Victor Papilian; *Samson și noul Dagon* [Samson and the New Dagon], 1939, by A.L. Zissu), psychological fiction

³⁷ Pierre Bourdieu, “Le champ littéraire”, *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales*, 1991, 89, p. 8.

³⁸ Written by a canonical author, *Gorila* is included (as a political novel) in all major literary histories, from G. Călinescu’s *Istoria literaturii române* (p. 736) to Nicolae Manolescu’s *Istoria critică a literaturii române. 5 secole de literatură* [The Critical History of Romanian Literature. 5 Centuries of Literature], Pitești, Paralela 45, 2008, p. 608.

(*Întoarcerea din rai*, 1934, by Mircea Eliade; *Surorile Veniamin* [*The Veniamin Sisters*], 1935, by Sergiu Dan; again *1916*, 1936, by Felix Aderca), experimental fiction (*Ruben Hirsch*, 1928–1929, by Scarlat Callimachi; *Un strigăt în noapte* [*A Scream in the Night*], 1933, by Adrian Hurmuz; *Fortul 13* [*Fort 13*], 1936, by Dragoș Protopopescu; *Fata Morgana*, 1937, by Gherasim Luca; *Prăvălia diavolului* [*The Devil's Shop*], 1942, by Mircea Streinul; *Cocktail*, 1942, by Victor Valeriu Martinescu), “Jewish” fiction (*Profeți și paiate* [*Profets and Clowns*], 1930, by Emil Dorian; “*Actele vorbește*” [*Acts Speak*], 1935, by I. Peltz; *Țară bună* [*Good Country*], 1936, by I. Peltz; *Trustul* [*The Trust*], 1938, by I. Călugăru), popular fiction (*Roșu, galben și albastru* [*Red, Yellow and Blue*], 1924, by Ion Minulescu; *Zvetlana*, 1930, by Octav Dessila; *Marșul femeilor* [*The March of Women*], 1933, by Alice Gabrielescu; *Tudor Ceaur Alcaz*, 1940–1942, by Ionel Teodoreanu; *Ochii strigoiului* [*The Eyes of the Undead*], 1942, by Cezar Petrescu).

Further subsets can be traced. For instance, war novels can specialize in the German occupation and in the retreat to Iași during WW I: *Strada Lăpușneanu. Cronică din 1917* [*Lăpușneanu Street. A Chronicle from 1917*] (1921) by Mihail Sadoveanu, again *Roșu, galben și albastru* (1924) by Ion Minulescu, *Războiul micului Tristan* [*Little Tristan's War*] (1937) by Mircea Gesticone. Or “social” fiction can delve into the social peripheries: *Ghetto veac XX* [*20th Century Ghetto*] (1934) by Ury Benador, *Bariera* [*The Barrier*] (1946) by G.M. Zamfirescu.

An interesting case is the eight-volume book series *În preajma revoluției* [*Around the Revolution*] (1932–1936) by C. Stere, usually labelled “political” by the critics because of the author’s high profile as a left-wing ideologist, though actually mixing long streams of *Bildungsroman*, memorial, family, social, or sentimental fiction.

Moreover, the “novelistic” boundaries of political fiction are just as permeable, engendering other transgressive forms: with autobiography (*Spre altă flacără. Spovedanie pentru învinși* [*To the Other Flame. The Confession of a Loser*], 1930, by Panait Istrati; *La răspântie de veacuri* [*At the Turn of the Century*], 1935, by Gala Galaction; *În noul Paradis* [*In the New Paradise*], 1941, by Lucia Dem. Bălășescu), anti-utopia (*Arimania sau Țara Buneiînțelegeri* [*Arimania or the Land of Goodwill*], 1923, by Iuliu Neagu-Negulescu), pamphlet (*Tablete din Țara de Kuty* [*Sketches from the Kuty Country*], 1933, by Tudor Arghezi), reportage (*Românii la Budapesta* [*The Romanians in Budapest*], 1920, by Radu Cosmin; *Mesia poate să aștepte* [*Messiah Can Wait*], 1933, by I. Ludo), or ideological essay (*Calea Calvarului* [*The Way of Calvary*], 1935, by A.L. Zissu). Some of them, though using fictional strategies (character portraiture, dialogue, surprising narrative modes) aren’t novels yet, but deserve being noted at the periphery of the genre.

Concluding Remarks

Judging many of these texts as political or not amounts to applying more or less tightly the criteria (i)-(iv) mentioned in the previous section, and especially the last one: how exactly can we rate the weight of “the political theme”, in the novel’s architecture of meanings, as “high” or “low”? And when should we consider it “enough” for the admittance of a novel in the class of political texts? Confronted with such a typical situation of a “qualitative” appreciation boiling down to a “quantitative” evaluation, I suppose that substantial help could be given by the tools of quantitative analysis.

The formalist approach has proved its usefulness in “recognizing” classes of texts based on the occurrence of certain language patterns, as shown in the experiments developed at the Stanford Literary Lab. The program DocuScope proved effective in operationalizing the concept of ideological novel, by charting and scatterplotting different linguistic categories³⁹. For that matter, the experiment contradicted Warren and Welleck’s claim that political fiction had no literary meaning whatsoever, as a strictly content-based class: actually, the ideological “content” comes all wrapped in its “form”, resulting in a distinctive rhetorical profile, maybe hard to see by a human, but detectible by means of stylometry.

Another way to use technology in order to detect a genre could be counting what the Stanford research team called “context words”. In our case, this more intuitive, though less exact, method⁴⁰ would consist in scanning for key-terms from the sphere of political institutions and concepts.

One way or another, computer-assisted analysis can be, if not decisive, at least instrumental in flagging the presence and weight of political storylines, political actors, and ideological inserts in a text, and eventually in shaping the genre database.

If this end seems far enough, the preliminary step of digitalizing the corpus of interwar Romanian fiction looks like a more tangible target. Before making these documents accessible and data-searchable, any attempt of mapping the field of political fiction remains only the site of a work in progress, with some materials in excess and some others missing.

³⁹ See Literary Lab, “Quantitative Formalism: An Experiment”, pp. 21-23. The DocuScope, a program run by Michael Witmore and the Stanford Literary Lab, detected a series of LATs (Language Action Types; i.e., words, strings of words, and language structures) characteristic of the ideological novel (Jacobin, anti-Jacobin and evangelical). According to the interpretation given by the authors, these LATs signal the presence of the argumentative style: oppositional particles (“but”, “however”, “not”), conditionals (indicating the realm of possibility), and the impersonal pronoun “it” (marking abstract discussions).

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 5.

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POLITICAL FICTION OR FICTION ABOUT POLITICS. HOW TO
OPERATIONALIZE A FLUID GENRE IN THE INTERWAR ROMANIAN
LITERATURE
(Abstract)

The marginal position into which political fiction was pushed, in modern times, is a predictable result of the literary canon relying on the strict principle of aesthetic autonomy. More than a few leading scholars dismissed it as a non-literary or a “bastardized” category, while others undertook constructing its theory. After reviewing some of their trials (and errors), the article puts forward a possible way of looking at the distribution of the genre in the interwar Romanian literary system. As an eclectic class, depending essentially on extra-aesthetic contexts, the political novel or the novel about politics was highly affected, in its fused narrative and ideological patterns, by the installation of communism. Until then, and particularly between the wars, writers experimented with many ways to interweave literature and ideology, resulting in a variegated and, sometimes, puzzling offer on the cultural market. Today’s researchers interested in mapping this dense landscape may find a valuable tool in the computer-assisted analysis.

Keywords: political fiction, genre theory, ideology, interwar Romanian literature, quantitative analysis.

FICȚIUNEA POLITICĂ SAU FICȚIUNEA DESPRE POLITICĂ. UN GEN FLUID ÎN LITERATURA ROMÂNĂ INTERBELICĂ*(Rezumat)*

Poziția periferică în care a fost proiectat romanul politic, în epoca modernă, e rezultatul predictibil al construcției canonului pe bazele autonomiei estetice. Unii cercetători l-au tratat ca pe o categorie non-literară sau „bastardă”, în vreme ce alții au încercat să-i construiască teorii mai mult sau mai puțin specializate. După ce trece în revistă câteva dintre aceste teorii, articolul de față propune un mod de a examina distribuția genului în sistemul literar românesc interbelic. Fiind o categorie eclectică, dependentă în cel mai înalt grad de contexte extra-estetice, romanul politic sau romanul despre politică a fost profund afectat, în straturile lui narative și ideologice fuzionate, de instalarea comunismului. Până atunci, și mai ales între cele două războaie mondiale, scriitorii au experimentat numeroase moduri de a combina literarul și ideologicul, dând naștere unei producții variate și, uneori, surprinzătoare, pe piața culturală a epocii. Azi, cercetătorii interesați să exploreze acest peisaj bogat ar putea găsi un instrument folositor în analiza cantitativă asistată de computer.

Cuvinte-cheie: roman politic, teoria genurilor, ideologie, literatura română interbelică, analiză cantitativă.