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## THE *IRONIC* SPIRIT IN THE CRITICISM OF THE ROMANIAN '70S GENERATION

I know, so I'm interpreting; I interpret, so I exist.  
Laurențiu Ulici, *Literatura română contemporană* [*Contemporary Romanian Literature*]

Is the Romanian literary criticism of the '70s decade of the last century and the criticism of the '70s generation the space in which the free and, in a very broad sense, liberal spirit manifested itself, in an atmosphere characterized by a resuscitation of dogmatism? And if the answer is, as I believe, positive, does this have anything to do with irony? In fact, I am thus implicitly formulating the hypothesis of the present pages. Through their choices expressed at different levels and especially through their critical practice itself, the critics of the '70s generation (following the rules of Ulici – who speaks about cohort<sup>1</sup>; however, it is about the critics who debut between 1966–1975) practise the liberal spirit, and Ulici could be considered the most eloquent case from this point of view. From a timorous militancy for the recovery of values, criticism becomes a bastion, even if a recessive one, subversive and perhaps all the more resistant, implying, anyway, a different relationship with the political authorities than in the '60s. It is no longer defined as a space of truth and power, but as a ground for dialogue and hypotheses in which the subject takes refuge. It's a weakness it assumes; which, one way or another, it exhibits. And, in this case, irony is no longer an instrument of sanctioning, of manifesting power and superiority, but one that makes difference, therefore diversity, possible.

In this context, it may seem strange that in *Literatura română contemporană. Promoția 70* [*Contemporary Romanian Literature. The 70's Cohort*], an essential book for my explorations, Laurențiu Ulici evokes at one point the opinion of Marin Mincu<sup>2</sup>, who at the end of the book about Ion Barbu, in 1981, talked about the fact that “the methodology of criticism is over-bid today at the expense of its object”<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Regarding this distinction and the reasons why I prefer the concept of generation, see Mircea A. Diaconu, “Laurențiu Ulici și banda lui Möbius” [“Laurențiu Ulici and the Möbius Strip”], *Glose. Revistă semestrială de studii românești*, Memorialul Ipotești – Centrul de studii „Mihai Eminescu”, 2020, 1-2, pp. 181-201.

<sup>2</sup> Marin Mincu, *Ion Barbu. Eseu despre textualizarea poetică* [*Ion Barbu. Essay about the Poetic Textualization*], București, Eminescu, 1981.

<sup>3</sup> Laurențiu Ulici, *Literatura română contemporană I – Promoția 70* [*Contemporary Romanian Literature. The 70s Cohort*], București, Eminescu, 1995, p. 482: “metodologia criticii e supralicitată

To continue: “everywhere critics are better known than novelists or poets [...]. This suggests no other conclusion than that criticism has come first, taking the place of literature”<sup>4</sup>. What interests us is the comment provided by Laurențiu Ulici:

Notwithstanding the exaggeration contained in these conclusions, their kernel of truth cannot be disputed, except to say that the real ascent of the critical commentary must be attributed to more complex social-historical and ideological causes, the dissatisfaction and autonomist hubris of criticism being, in the context of the last thirty years, also a symptom of ideological mannerism and signifying a certain historical decline<sup>5</sup>.

In both views, the voice of criticism involves something essential about the spirit of time. Interesting, however, is the cause of this phenomenon: for Ulici, it is to be sought at the level of “ideological mannerism”, of “historical decline”. I would go further, however: the distinctive notes of the poetry of the moment, as well as of the critics, have their roots in a certain impasse that manifests itself at the socio-political level. Not only poetry, which Ulici considered along these coordinates<sup>6</sup>, but also criticism is recessive, “weak”, “ironic”, “mannerist”. The foreground is taken by the subject, not by the object, and this implies irony, albeit not in its established form.

Literary criticism has more than once turned to the instruments of irony. By simulating that it says one thing only to communicate exactly the opposite, it deliberately seeks a position of strength. That is why the stakes of irony are not correction, but the manifestation of superiority. By implication, not the truth, but the victory. Even if there is no witness (although irony is a two-way concern), the ironic stance relies on the fact that the object of irony is aware of its minority position, which makes the effect doubly destructive: it places the comic object under ridicule by placing it not only under the gaze of a witness, but also under its own gaze. As there is no chance of rescue, the ironized one is definitively compromised.

There is, however, a different kind of irony, or a different kind of criticism: one that places itself, as G. Vattimo<sup>7</sup> would say, in a *weak ontology*. It is meta-

astăzi în dauna obiectului său”. Unless otherwise stated, the quotations are translated into English by the author of this paper.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 482: “pretutindeni criticii sunt mai cunoscuți decât romancierii, poeții [...]. Aceasta nu sugerează altă concluzie decât că critica a trecut pe primul plan luând locul literaturii”.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 482-483: “Lăsând la o parte exagerarea cuprinsă în aceste constatări, sămburele lor de adevăr nu poate fi contestat, doar că reala ascensiune a comentariului critic trebuie pusă pe seama unor cauze mai complexe social-istorice și ideologice, nemulțumirea și orgoliul autonomist ale criticii fiind, în contextul ultimilor treizeci de ani și un simptom de manierism ideologic, semnificând un anume declin istoric”.

<sup>6</sup> See *Ibidem*.

<sup>7</sup> See Gianni Vattimo, *The End of Modernity. Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Post-Modern Culture*. Translated by John R. Snyder, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1991.

discursive and subjects its own discourse to relativization, in which case the object of irony is itself. It is not that criticism that could be said, in Caragiale's words, to respect itself and to wish to be respected. It is not the strong criticism that legitimizes, that offers seats in the Pantheon, that says which direction literature moves in and that validates absolutely. In this case, the critic carries with him, at all times, a mirror by which he subjects his own condition to an exercise of suspicion. In the established view, the critic should be a judge, a doctor or a projective court, if not a visionary (and maybe all of this at once): he establishes diagnoses, prescribes treatments, and sets the direction. To provide confidence, the authority it projects should be flawless.

How could criticism be credible if it expresses hesitation and leaves its weaknesses in plain sight? A critic of this kind, who does not hesitate to hide in the painting, may not inspire confidence. The plebs need dictators, just as young writers, and always the mediocre ones, need advice and encouragement. It seems to me, on the contrary, that it is precisely the critic who doubts himself; looking at himself ironically, he poses as the saviour. It is as if he were placing a bet: to give up power and even the vanity and illusion of power, and, by giving these up, to get to possess them, nevertheless. It is a game, the game of the anti-phrase, by which Costache Negruzzi, Al. Odobescu or Ion Creangă appeal to us, deliberately, programmatically, provocatively, simulating the guise of the minority. I will invoke Rorty a little later, from whom I am now quoting only one phrase: "The ironist – the person who has doubts about his own final vocabulary, his own moral identity, and perhaps his own sanity – desperately needs to talk to other people, needs this with the same urgency that people need to make love"<sup>8</sup>.

So, we can speak of two types of irony in literary criticism: one as a sword, another as a mirror. In the first hypostasis, a witness is needed with whom the literary critic has entered, even implicitly, an alliance of power. In the second, you yourself are not only the object of irony, but also its witness. But irony is a game, and the other, the one subjected to irony, is not eliminated, but saved. When Mircea Nedelciu, Adriana Babeți, Mircea Mihăieș, the authors of *Femeia în roșu* [*The Woman in Red*]<sup>9</sup>, reproduce in the last pages the text published by Martin Adams Mooreville in *The New York Literary Journal*, a playful invention, they do not destroy their reader but force him to enter the text. Just like Odobescu in the last chapter, *the most loved by the reader*, which the latter, in fact, should write by himself. Pranks, as an essential means used by the ironist, are not useless, and Ulici, even if not keen on them, often uses them. Their role is to bring us closer, by means of peculiarity, to facts that only seem familiar. However, of the critics, only those who refuse loud irony appeal to them, thus placing under the sign of the

<sup>8</sup> Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989, p. 186.

<sup>9</sup> Mircea Nedelciu, Adriana Babeți, Mircea Mihăieș, *Femeia în roșu*, București, Cartea Românească, 1990.

relative their own condition, and therefore the very condition of literary criticism.

When it comes to irony as we see it, Richard Rorty's book on *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (1989) cannot be missed. Very schematically (with all the abuse implied by any quasi-dogmatic simplification), this title tells us the following: because truths and knowledge are contingent, they have a hypothetical character, and consciousness of relativity and the ironic situation are inevitable; hence the tolerance and, ultimately, our solidarity with each other. With these facts in mind, Rorty dissociates between the *metaphysicist* and the *ironist*, and at the beginning of the chapter entitled "Private Irony and Liberal Hope", he states:

I shall define an "ironist" as someone who fulfils three conditions: (1) She has radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary she currently uses, because she has been impressed by other vocabularies, vocabularies taken as final by people or books she has encountered; (2) she realizes that argument phrased in her present vocabulary can neither underwrite nor dissolve these doubts; (3) insofar as she philosophizes about her situation, she does not think that her vocabulary is closer to reality than others, that it is in touch with a power not herself. [...] I call people of this sort "ironists" because their realization that anything can be made to look good or bad by being redescribed, and their renunciation of the attempt to formulate criteria of choice between final vocabularies, puts them in the position which Sartre called "meta-stable": never quite able to take themselves seriously because always aware that the terms in which they describe themselves are subject to change, always aware of the contingency and fragility of their final vocabularies, and thus of their selves [...]. The opposite of irony is common sense. For that is the watchword of those who unselfconsciously describe everything important in terms of the final vocabulary to which they and those around them are habituated [...] the metaphysician is someone who takes the question "What is the intrinsic nature of (e.g., justice, science, knowledge, Being, faith, morality, philosophy)?" at face value. He assumes that the presence of a term in his own final vocabulary ensures that it refers to something which *has* a real essence<sup>10</sup>.

For the ironist – who loses any right to power – it seems that things are unstable, for they are a succession of interpretations. He himself is unstable, for he is continually becoming. Hence the weakness and, as an expression of precisely this weakness, the strength. While unravelling, he takes a step outside the system to re-read the facts; a second step leads to the reading of the interpretations of these facts. Indeed, because truth and knowledge are, like the subject, in a continuous metamorphosis, everything is "in the act of" and thus acquires existentialist dimensions. Hence the weakness and, as Rorty says, the "inability" *to confer*, but also *to be strength*.

In defence of his point of view, and to see why this point is framed by a discussion of liberalism, Rorty invokes Isaiah Berlin who, in *Four Essays on*

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<sup>10</sup> Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, pp. 73-74.

*Freedom* (1969), defended “negative freedom” against “teleonomic conceptions of human perfection”. Finally, as Rorty says:

Berlin ended his essay by quoting Joseph Schumpeter, who said, “To realise the relative validity of one’s convictions and yet stand for them unflinchingly, is what distinguishes a civilized man from a barbarian”. Berlin comments, “To demand more than this is perhaps a deep and incurable metaphysical need; but to allow it to determine one’s practice is a symptom of an equally deep, and more dangerous, moral and political immaturity”. In the jargon I have been developing, Schumpeter’s claim that this is the mark of the civilized person translates into the claim that the liberal societies of our century have produced more and more people who are able to recognize the contingency of the vocabulary in which they state their highest hopes – the contingency of their own consciences – and yet have remained faithful to those consciences. Figures like Nietzsche, William James, Freud, Proust, and Wittgenstein illustrate what I have called ‘freedom as the recognition of contingency.’ In this chapter I shall claim that such recognition is the chief virtue of the members of a liberal society, and that the culture of such a society should aim at curing us of our ‘deep metaphysical’ need<sup>11</sup>.

Liberalism is associated here precisely with a fragile assumption of one’s own convictions, and “freedom in recognition of contingency” is the keystone of the whole vision, which accredits not the idea of renouncing beliefs, but, on the contrary, the idea of a total engagement doubled by the shadow of difference and doubt.

I would also note the following excerpt:

[...] the ironist – the person who has doubts about his own final vocabulary, his own moral identity, and perhaps his own sanity – desperately needs to talk to other people, needs this with the same urgency as people need to make love. He needs to do so because only conversation enables him to handle these doubts, to keep himself together, to keep his web of beliefs and desires coherent enough to enable him to act<sup>12</sup>.

Later, after invoking Socrates and Proust, Rorty talks about “erotic relationships with interlocutors”, masochistic, sadistic, majestic relationships, stating:

But which they are is not as important as that these relationships be with people intelligent enough to understand what one is talking about – people who are capable of seeing how one might have these doubts are like because they know what such doubts are like, people who are themselves given to irony<sup>13</sup>.

The pleasure (the word is far from eloquent) of communicating, of being on stage, of speaking to others is the testimony of a crisis converted into a game of

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 46.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 186.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 187.

attracting accomplices. Irony needs witnesses not only to validate the execution, as in the case of the first type of irony, but also to re-establish the subject, which acquires, through complicity, an external self-validation.

Finally, how does Laurentiu Ulici enter this equation? How much does he practice “freedom in recognition of contingency”? How much does he engage as a subject, for reasons that would be worth investigating, in the exploration of literature? The critic is also human, we would say, if this statement, made by Baudelaire, were not the echo of an echo. But it applies not only to Laurentiu Ulici, but to the entire generation of critics to which he belongs, beyond the fact that this is how he represents it. Its reduction to the common denominator, Ulici, is not a simplification, but an identification of the essence, of a core that ensures the unity of some critical figures that could be considered hugely different. In fact, although hugely different, something unites them. Going a little further, we could say that their distinctive notes are also found in the books published in the '70s and '80s by the same critics of the previous generation, an issue that we will not dwell on now. The fact is that, by referring to the critics of the '60 generation, Caius Dobrescu supports his hypotheses regarding the liberal spirit of criticism in the years of socialist dogmatism. The force of the dialogue, the culture of tolerance as a conversational medium, the doubt as the foundation of the analytic excursion makes criticism a point of resistance and a solution of survival. More than literature itself, literary criticism would become “the privileged vehicle of the public spirit in post-Stalinist communist society”<sup>14</sup>. In any case, the space of literary criticism as a public space is “defined by a dynamic of uncertainty and a certain speculative freedom in the issuance of hypotheses”<sup>15</sup>. Tacitly accepted as an “end in itself”, freedom of critical expression, however, had an implicit, subversive role.

Caius Dobrescu's analysis, a defence of the Romanian literary criticism in post-Stalinism, is a look from the ridge. The defining notes are not contextualized historically or by category, but their illustration in the writings of Eugen Simion, Nicolae Manolescu and Mircea Martin (I would like to believe that the order is purely chronological) also suggests that these are the reference names for the entire post-Stalinist era and that differences between the '60s critics and those from later generations (or from other categories) do not exist. Frankly speaking, Caius Dobrescu's theoretical plea makes my hypothesis regarding the critics of the

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<sup>14</sup> Caius Dobrescu, *Plăcerea de a gândi. Moștenirea intelectuală a criticii literare românești (1960–1989), ca expresie identitară într-un tablou global al culturii cognitive [The Pleasure of Thinking. The Intellectual Heritage of the Romanian Literary Criticism (1960–1989) as an Expression of Identity in a Global Picture of Cognitive Culture]*, București, Muzeul Literaturii Române, 2013, p. 93: “vehicolul privilegiat al spiritului public în societatea comunistă post-stalinistă”.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 104: “definit de o dinamică a incertitudinii și de o anumită libertate speculativă, a emiterii de ipoteze”.

'70s generation irrelevant. The pleasure of thinking, as an expression of the conversational culture in a community based on hypothetical interpretations and even on playfulness (see the excellent analysis of G. Călinescu, focused on his narcissistic and playful tone) would be defining for the entire post-Stalinist criticism. In fact, although he speaks of the '60s generation, Caius Dobrescu does not discuss it in generational terms. I would say, also a little playfully: if for Ulici the '60s and the '70s (the '80s, too) are part of the same generation (they are just different "cohorts"), for Caius Dobrescu they all belong to the post-Stalinist critics and are subsumable to an extended '60s generation. He may be right, no doubt. He is interested in the *liberal-epicurean* spirit manifested by critics who write in the '70s and '80s, that is, over the last two decades of communism, those who passed through or by the seventh decade of liberalization. As far as I am concerned, emphasising the difference between the critics of the '60s generation and those of the next generation is essential. This is precisely because I intend to underline the distinctive notes of the criticism of the '70s generation and because it seems to me that each of the groups previously invoked has its own history, which can easily be, at least in outline, (re)constituted. And I am going to start from a few simple notes.

I do not insist on reservations on this matter now. The fact is that, precisely by comparison with the preceding one, with which, from a certain moment, they fatally coexist, the "cohort" to which Ulici belongs is perceived as recessive and openly uncommitted to paradigm shifts; on the other hand, even Ulici's theory regarding the relationship between generations and cohorts is placed under the sign of the hypothetical, of conventions, of contingency<sup>16</sup>. "The war between conventions is not over", he says. This is how I came to the portrait of Laurentiu Ulici: an intelligent, playful builder of hypotheses and fictions of legitimation that must be read in a hypothetical key. It was not by chance that he said that "irony is man's ability to watch from above, with serenity, as down in the arena life takes imagination – or vice versa – in its horns"<sup>17</sup>. It is obviously a form of *despondency*, which could be contextualized by a reverted reading of Isaiah Berlin's statement invoked a little earlier, namely not "to recognize the relative validity of one's own convictions and, nevertheless, to support them firmly – this is what distinguishes a civilized man from a barbarian", but "to firmly uphold one's own convictions and, however, to recognize their relative validity". This is the distinction that marks a new type of critical ontology. Therefore, was there, behind Ulici's vision, a *political* stake and a certain subversive way of solving problems in literary life, or

<sup>16</sup> Mircea A. Diaconu, "Laurențiu Ulici și banda lui Möbius", pp. 181-201.

<sup>17</sup> Laurențiu Ulici, "Prefață" ["Foreword"], in *Antologia poezilor tineri. 1978–1982* [*Anthology of Young Poets. 1978–1982*], București, Muzeul Literaturii Române, 2005, p. 7: "ironia e aptitudinea omului de a privi din lojă, cu seninătate, cum jos, în arenă, viața ia în coarne imaginația sau viceversa".

just a certain way of being? At the same time intelligent and sceptical, committed and ironic, playful and existentialist, and thus able to put everything under the sign of contingency? His innate playfulness – his fascination with “speculative fictions” – comes easy: some fictions are basically the pyramids structuring the exhaustive utopian image of the literature of an era, and by extension of all eras.

Speaking of which, here is another detail: Ulici defines his generation almost exclusively by way of their poetry. The 1982 preface to the anthology of young poets (printed only in 2005) reveals, as defining features, *mannerism*, that is, “a loss of confidence in language”, the “refinement of the poetic phrase” and a “relativistic perspective”, *concealment*, that is, a substitution of the self through “cultural strokes”, and *ironism*, that is, in the words of Jankélévitch whom he invokes, “suppleness, extreme consciousness”. A space of freedom, at the same time showing and hiding, poetry is not, however, a realm of debates or manifestos; it deals with individual options that are hard to argue with. A study should be written sometime, about how the poetry of the '70s generation takes full advantage of the “conquests” of the '60s in order to internalize itself. It is no longer the “heroic” poetry of the immediate forerunners; it's not a poem of visions, but rather of burrows<sup>18</sup>: a refuge in uncharted territories.

Has the same thing happened to criticism? What does it do, or, more precisely, what is literary criticism under these circumstances? I will try to reconstruct Ulici's “system” by using as a source the “list” that he proposes in his book. My aim is to identify the implicit or explicit criteria based on which he proposes a hierarchy. In my opinion, the critical canon (that first level of the pyramid) contains names that are precisely relevant to the way Ulici approximates his axiological criteria.

Let us first take a look at Ulici's “list”. At the top of the pyramid stand, in alphabetical order, Al. Călinescu, Livius Ciocârlie, Mircea Iorgulescu, Florin Manolescu, Marin Mincu, Eugen Negrici, Basarab Nicolescu, Marian Papahagi, Ioana Em. Petrescu, Liviu Petrescu, Andrei Pleșu, Ion Vartic – the '70s criticism, from Al. Călinescu to Ion Vartic. For Ulici (and for the critics of the '70s), the critic can have as an object not only, in a very broad sense, the life of literature, but also, as in the case of Pleșu, “the interpretation of the spiritual products of this world”<sup>19</sup>; thus, literary critics can very well be something else than the existing convention assumed. Pleșu is an art critic, Basarab Nicolescu is a physicist, Mircea Iorgulescu is a polemist, Florin Manolescu “a mathematical spirit”, Negrici a linguist and stylistician, Marin Mincu a semiotician, Liviu Petrescu an aesthetician etc. Even the fact of their being academics (as was the case of Al. Călinescu, Ioana

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>19</sup> Laurențiu Ulici, *Literatura română contemporană*, p. 496: “interpretarea produselor spirituale ale acestei lumi”.



Em. and Liviu Petrescu, for example), involves specific nuances, which go beyond the conventional field of literary criticism. The statement may seem somewhat exaggerated; but, as we shall see, this “betrayal” of the status of the literary critic is doubled by an expansion of the terrain of literary criticism, and of that of literature itself. Suffice it to mention Andrei Pleșu and Basarab Nicolescu: the first is discussed for *Minima moralia*<sup>20</sup>, the second, not for the essay on Ion Barbu (although Ulici would have found interesting arguments there as well), but for the essay, situated between philosophy and science, about Jakob Boehme<sup>21</sup>.

Let me first focus on what seems to me to be the vector element of this change. And for this I will resort to a quote from the piece about Ioana Em. Petrescu. Ulici speaks in her case about “the conjunction of the three lines of the literary spirit” (namely, “a rare case of literary historian with a critical vocation and theoretical appetite”), “but also the finesse with which an *eminently speculative predisposition* is converted, in the hermeneutical practice, into *ontological disposition*” [emphasis added]. However, the essential element that hermeneutical practice should presuppose (a decisive element in its axiology) is *the ontological disposition*. This places Ulici in the vicinity of existentialism (and not by chance, as he was an admirer of Sartre, often invoked in his texts), as when Ulici argues along lines such as these:

I know, so I interpret; I interpret, so I exist – this would be the main syllogism, defining, theoretically speaking, a whole category of critics (which would also include, from the '70th cohort, Al. Călinescu, Livius Ciocârlie, Eugen Negrici, Marian Papahagi, Liviu Petrescu and Ion Vartic) and also illustrated by Ioana Em. Petrescu<sup>22</sup>.

I do not think this statement was made in the first edition of this book (published in 1995). The fact is that, interested in Paul Zumthor’s dissociation between reading and interpretation, Ulici believes that the strong point of Ioana Em. Petrescu’s writings is to be founded on the existential relevance of criticism. This is one of the hallmarks of the generation to which Ulici himself belongs, and which was initially indebted, as a kind of solution to failure, to more technical, formalistic, depersonalizing, post-structuralist methods. That is why this

<sup>20</sup> See Andrei Pleșu, *Minima moralia. Elemente pentru o etică a intervalului* [*Minima moralia. Elements for an Ethics of the Interval*], București, Cartea Românească, 1988.

<sup>21</sup> Basarab Nicolescu, *La science, le sens et l'évolution. Essai sur Jakob Boehme*, Paris, Éditions du Félin, 1988.

<sup>22</sup> Laurențiu Ulici, *Literatura română contemporană*, p. 491: “conjunția celor trei linii ale spiritului literat (sau literar)”; “caz rar de istoric literar cu vocație critică și apetit teoretic”; “dar și prin finețea cu care o *predispoziție eminentemente speculativă* se convertește, în practica hermeneutică, în *dispoziție ontologică*” (my emphasis, M.D.); “Știu, deci interpretez; interpretez, deci exist – acesta ar fi silogismul guvernator, propriu, teoretic vorbind, unei întregi categorii de critici (în care ar mai intra, din promoția 70, Al. Călinescu, Livius Ciocârlie, Eugen Negrici, Marian Papahagi, Liviu Petrescu și Ion Vartic) și realizat în manieră personală de Ioana Em. Petrescu”.

dimension should also be considered in the analysis of his criticism, in order to configure a moral portrait of the critic as well as of his generation. Unquestionably, the portrait of the critics of Ulici's generation is also a self-portrait. If I were to exaggerate just a little, I would say: the implicit project of literary criticism his generation stands for barely leads him to the end, for he assumes (in the most obvious and radical way) the illusory character of presence, a sense of vanity in the form of a refusal of permanence. He prefers criticism *in the act*, and, like an actor, he stages the disappearance of the critic. Ulici writes with a keen sense of vacuity and absence. And so do many of the critics he likes in his generation.

Let us go back, however, to the rationalist syllogism with which Ulici fixes the essential touch of his generation: *I know, so I interpret; I interpret, so I exist*. The act of interpreting as legitimation of concrete existence is the key with which one enters Ulici's system. In the case of Ioana Em. Petrescu, Ulici's argumentation is the following: the book with which she debuted, about Budai-Deleanu<sup>23</sup> (including a comprehensive discussion about parody and the comic epos in the premodern European space) would be like an inverted pyramid; "the author needed (in the psychological sense, I think) the premise of 'I know, so I know' before the clear affirmation of the power of interpretation"<sup>24</sup>. Ulici obviously disavows what he sees as bookish excess. Later on, the study about Eminescu (which Ioana Em. Petrescu published in 1978)<sup>25</sup> would reverse the pyramid to a normal position: here a theoretical structure is reduced to essentials, the priority being interpretation. And this interpretation reveals that Eminescu's imaginary is based on cosmological models (validated on a mythical or scientific plane), that dwell in the unconscious: "therefore, the author's aim is to define Eminescu's work through an ontological semantics, towards the rigors of which Petrescu maintains throughout his essay a high fidelity and, at the same time, a supple distrust, hence the relevance of the argumentation in the interpretation of poetic texts"<sup>26</sup>. *High fidelity* and *supple distrust* could be, as we shall see, the reflex of the critic's own self in the process of interpreting. Engaging in interpretation also involves engaging in one's own self. To make a passing remark, I am glad to receive such an unexpected validation: I wrote about Ioana Em. Petrescu's diary (the publication as such of the

<sup>23</sup> Ioana Em. Petrescu, *Ion Budai-Deleanu și eposul comic [Ion Budai-Deleanu and the Comic Epos]*, Cluj-Napoca, Dacia, 1974.

<sup>24</sup> Laurențiu Ulici, *Literatura română contemporană*, p. 491: "autoarea a avut nevoie (în sens, cred, psihologic) de premisa 'știu, deci știu' înainte de afirmarea clară a puterii de interpretare".

<sup>25</sup> Ioana Em. Petrescu, *Eminescu. Modele cosmologice și viziune poetică [Eminescu. Cosmological Models and Poetic Vision]*, București, Minerva, 1978.

<sup>26</sup> Laurențiu Ulici, *Literatura română contemporană*, p. 492: "așadar, se urmărește definirea operei eminesciene printr-o semantică ontologică, față de rigorile căreia Ioana Em. Petrescu păstrează pe tot parcursul eselui său o înaltă fidelitate și, totodată, o suplă neîncredere, de unde și pertința argumentației în interpretarea textelor poetice".

journal seemed to some of the “metaphysical” admirers an impiety) revealing precisely the fact that the study about Eminescu, so solidly analytical and theoretical, a purely rational exercise that gives rise to an exceptional excursion, has its roots in his own biography, in his own weaknesses and personal pains. It is a pity that Ulici did not know the true title of Ioana Em. Petrescu’s book *Eminescu și mutațiile poeziei românești* [*Eminescu and the Mutations of the Romanian Poetry*]<sup>27</sup>, rejected by censorship, which was: *Eminescu – poet tragic* [*Eminescu – a Tragic Poet*]. Nevertheless, the interpretative availabilities put into play by Ioana Em. Petrescu are associated by Ulici with his own ontological disposition.

It is not by chance that the portraits that Ulici paints in *History* begin with a synthetic definition of man. The critic is also a man, Ulici seems to say, drawing effigies from the very beginning. Such is the functioning of the introduction to his text about Livius Ciocârlie: “An admirable writer of criticism is this withdrawn, silent, as if shy, as if inhibited by a great delicacy and wise decorum, Livius Ciocârlie”<sup>28</sup>. Or the one about Mircea Iorgulescu:

An intelligent, incisive and prompt feuilletonist, trenchant to the point of exclusivism, always at the core of the historical reality to whose changing contexts he frequently links his observations and judgments regarding the reality of literature, a duelling temperament with a partly displayed availability for pamphlet, diatribe and ideological polemic, an iconoclastic soul kept in check by a flair for opportunity that rarely failed, Mircea Iorgulescu<sup>29</sup>.

The critic is also a man, and Ulici begins by establishing his effigy, like in the nineteenth-century physiologies. And Ulici’s phrase itself has the marks of literature: he is a writer of literary criticism himself.

In the case of Livius Ciocârlie, Ulici explicitly states that, by writing about others, the critic writes about himself. The others are also masks of the self: “In all hypostases, however, under all these masks, the critic never looks at himself, he does not forget the purpose for which he became the writers’ correspondent”<sup>30</sup>. The newer books by Livius Ciocârlie, about Cioran and Caragiale, about death, about Valéry, which Ulici never got to read, only confirm Ulici’s hypotheses. Another case: attracted by the dual nature of the world about which he writes,

<sup>27</sup> Ioana Em. Petrescu, *Eminescu și mutațiile poeziei românești* [*Eminescu and the Mutations of the Romanian Poetry*], Cluj-Napoca, Dacia, 1989.

<sup>28</sup> Laurențiu Ulici, *Literatura română contemporană*, p. 472: “Admirabil scriitor de critică este acest retras, tăcut, parcă timid, parcă inhibat, de o mare delicatețe și înțeleaptă bună cuviință Livius Ciocârlie”.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 476: “Foiletonist inteligent, incisiv și prompt, tranșant până la exclusivism, mereu în miezul realității istorice, de ale cărei contexte schimbătoare își leagă frecvent observațiile și judecățile privitoare la realitatea literaturii, temperament de duelgiu, cu disponibilități doar parțial etalate pentru pamflet, diatribă și polemică ideologică, suflet iconoclast supravegheat de un fler al oportunității ce rareori a dat greș, Mircea Iorgulescu”.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 474: “În toate ipostazele însă, sub toate aceste măști, criticul nu se uită nici o clipă pe sine, nu-și uită care va să zică scopul pentru care a intrat în corespondența scriitorilor”.

Marian Papahagi would be a dual spirit himself: “Marian Papahagi is a formidable comparatist, rigorous in terms of his critical language, inventive in terms of associations and analogies, finally, a critic wearing with honour and aplomb his dual nature, affirming it especially when he challenges it”<sup>31</sup>. In the case of Florin Manolescu, referring to his first book, *Poezia criticilor* [*The Poetry of Critics*]<sup>32</sup>, Ulici argues: under the appearance of a journey into historical-literary territory, a true critical program is formulated; in fact, an idea about criticism impregnated by the feeling of personal involvement, not without “the skillful hubris disguised in a ‘we’ which is not a plural of majesty here, but a mark of impersonality”<sup>33</sup>.

Critics seem to be not just critics, which causes the territory of literature to expand to the point of pulverisation of the very concept. So, what do the critics of the '70s generation write about? Livius Ciocârlie is preoccupied by the writers' correspondence, by their intimacy:

The critic reads the letters of great writers without protocol reservations, freed from the pressure of the work and considering them as carriers of significant information about the character who confesses in them. However, whenever he finds them, he does not leave without comment the threads that touch the author's work”<sup>34</sup>.

In *Negru pe alb* (a mirror title), Ciocârlie writes about “texts”, thus seeing literature as “the organization of language in a ‘fabric’ that ‘is made’, ‘is worked through an unbroken braiding’ (R. Barthes), a multi-coloured and labyrinthine fabric within which several interferences occur, leading, due to the Brownian movements of the parts, to the uncertainty of meaning”<sup>35</sup>. After exploring the writers' correspondence, Cioran's *Notebooks* etc., Ciocârlie builds his own subject, a text about himself, his body, his writings. A way of surviving.

Al. Călinescu writes about Caragiale's sketches, and, with help from the Russian formalists, he demonstrates how Caragiale undermines the established forms, foregrounding the peripheral, the secondary, the insignificant. Another example could be provided by his analysis of Mircea Iorgulescu. Using Caragiale's work as a pretext, he writes a pamphlet about the Romanian world. His essay is not about the writings of I.L. Caragiale, but about the Romanian society, be it

<sup>31</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 491: “Marian Papahagi e un comparatist redutabil, un rigorist în materie de expresie critică, un inventiv în materie de asociațiuni și analogii, în fine, un critic ce-și poartă cu onoare și aplomb natura duală, afirmând-o mai ales atunci când o contestă”.

<sup>32</sup> See Florin Manolescu, *Poezia criticilor* [*The Poetry of Literary Critics*], București, Eminescu, 1971.

<sup>33</sup> Laurențiu Ulici, *Literatura română contemporană*, p. 479: “orgoliul abil deghizat în exprimarea printr-un ‘noi’ care nu e aici un plural al majestății, ci o marcă impersonală”.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 473: “Critical citește scrisorile unor mari scriitori fără rețineri protocolare, eliberat de presiunea operei și considerându-le în sine ca purtătoare de informații semnificative despre personajul care s-a mărturisit în ele, cu toate că, acolo unde le găsește, nu lasă fără comentariu firele atingătoare cu opera”.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 474: “organizarea limbajului într-o ‘țesătură’ ce ‘se face’, ‘se lucrează printr-o împletire neîntreruptă’ (R. Barthes), țesătură multicoloră și labirintică, înlăuntrul căreia se produc o seamă de interferențe, conducând, grație unor mișcări browniene a părților, la incertitudinea înțelesului”.

historical (that is, from the communist years), or eternal. Eugen Negrici, in turn, recovers by presenting as literature not only the historical chronicles of Ureche or Costin or the religious prose of Antim Ivireanul, but also everything that can be placed under the sign of “involuntary expressiveness”. As Negrici himself states, “the involuntary expressiveness of some texts of ecclesiastical, philosophical, historiographical, administrative-judicial character”, as “there are no firm criteria for distinguishing the literary verbal structure from the non-literary one, as long as the message conveys not the meaning, but the form, as long as the codes of the transmitter can never be identical to those of the receiver”<sup>36</sup>.

The mirage of the novel haunts some of the '70s critics. Livius Ciocârlie, Florin Manolescu, Marin Mincu are novelists, too; Ioana Em. Petrescu keeps a diary, and for a few others criticism is, in a very transparent manner, a form of autobiographical writing. The critics of Ulici's generation take refuge in the novel, in journalism, some in autofictions and diaries, others simply redraw the territory of literary criticism or leave it behind, aiming at more permissive forms. Perhaps their victory is to be found in some of their failures, too.

But what is a critic, what are his defining attributes? In the discussion about Al. Călinescu, Ulici says:

Undisturbed by the demon of originality, the critic prefers for the time being to selectively and reflexively accumulate theoretical information, an operation unfortunately not at all trivial in the context of our criticism, with few exceptions allergic to theory, otherwise inevitable to the critical act. The romantic stage of sufficient critical talent hardly passes like an untreated cold, however, it passes because the radical changes imposed by this century (and) by the literary aesthetics (of creation as well as of reception) demand it<sup>37</sup>.

But Ulici prefers shades, not extremes. That is why the relationship among talent, critical intelligence and modern methods is fragile here. In Ulici's view, without exhibiting an excess of method or of culture, method, science and culture should melt into the critical interpretation as a consequence of an *ontological disposition*.

What is a critic, then? Not only the opposition between culture and life is at stake here, but also the one between culture and writing (and between erudition and talent). In Ulici's view, the defining feature of the critic should be intelligence, in the absence of which any method is useless and superfluous. This comment is made in the analysis of Al. Călinescu. The issue returns in the piece about Florin Manolescu:

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<sup>36</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 486: “nu există criterii ferme pentru distingerea structurii verbale literare de cea neliterară, câtă vreme prin mesaj se transmite nu sensul, ci forma, câtă vreme codurile emițătorului nu pot fi niciodată identice cu ale receptorului”.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 472.

As the mathematical spirit includes, among the attributes that define it, intelligence, rigor (order) – the fact that many great mathematicians were distracted, disordered and solitary beings does not contradict the attribute of rigor (order); it possibly says something about the poetic foundation of the mathematical spirit, still insufficiently explored – mobility (playful) and imagination (associative), it is easy to understand why a literary critic with such a spirit will not invoke the so-called critical talent, but his intelligence, which is the same thing, considering the critic's talent to be intelligence<sup>38</sup>.

Therefore, intelligence means talent, that is, a poetic undecurrent materialized in the playful mobility and associative imagination of a critic. The article about Florin Manolescu begins as such: “A mathematical spirit among the critics of the '70s cohort is Florin Manolescu (b. 1943). What does that mean? The mathematical spirit is like the mystical spirit: you have it or you don't, regardless of the amount of knowledge in the field and, when it exists, it defies affiliation to a discipline”<sup>39</sup>. The level of culture is not decisive, there must be something else. The intelligence, the talent, the playfulness all the critics need, are innate. What intelligence means, how it materializes in a literary critic's work, Laurentiu Ulici does not say. But we find out what talent is, and between talent and intelligence the relationship is close to synonymy:

The test of literary talent in the case of a critic is not the fact that he writes beautifully, that is, expressively, but that he thinks from within literature, just as the test of critical intelligence is not the reconstitution in paraphrase of the literary work, but the constitution or revelation of its invisible 'aura' to the understanding of the common eye<sup>40</sup>.

What do literary critics write? One could always approximate a few algorithms. Some begin under the sign of practising modern poetics, moving on to writing essays and even fiction. Others “fail” in their attempt and end up writing pamphlets, journalism, studies of literary history; some are equal to themselves in what could be the object of a progressive becoming through accumulation, while others, whose natures are those of writers rather than of cold, impersonal, neutral,

<sup>38</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 479: “Cum spiritul matematic include printre atributele ce-l definesc inteligența, rigoarea (ordinea) – faptul că mulți mari matematicieni au fost ființe distrase, dezordonate și solitare nu contrazice atributul rigorii (ordinii), spune eventual ceva despre subsolul poetic al spiritului matematic, încă insuficient explorat – mobilitatea (ludică) și imaginația (asociativă), e lesne de înțeles de ce un critic literar cu un astfel de spirit va invoca nu așa zisul talent critic, ci inteligența sau, ceea ce e totuna, va considera că talentul criticului este inteligență”.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 478-479: “Un spirit matematic printre criticii promoției '70 este Florin Manolescu (n. 1943). Ce să însemne asta? Spiritul matematic e ca și spiritul mistic: îl ai sau nu, indiferent de cantitatea cunoștințelor în domeniu și, atunci când există, sfidează afilierea la o disciplină”.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 497: “Proba talentului literar în cazul unui critic nu e faptul că scrie frumos, adică expresiv, ci că gândește din interiorul literaturii, după cum proba inteligenței critice nu e reconstituirea în parafrază a operei literare, ci constituirea sau revelarea 'aurei' sale invizibile pentru ochiul comun”.

exegetical academics, act from the beginning in a criss-cross pattern, constant in their inconstancy.

Thus, Ion Vartic, Ulici says, is “an example, among the highest in the cohort, of a ‘terrible fit’, under the sky of transparency, of artistic writing and speculative thinking.”<sup>41</sup> This is about – Ulici himself places the phrase between inverted commas – “literary talent with a critical theme”. One way or another, Vartic writes literature. Livius Ciocârlie, even in his early writings, seems to be writing a novel, and one of his generational colleagues will be significantly interested in *the novel of the critics*: “The object of the book is not the work of writers, but their whole person (behaviour, mentality, psychology) as it is revealed in the correspondence between writers”<sup>42</sup>. Then, again:

Under the appearance of describing and analysing the writers’ correspondence, Livius Ciocârlie actually paints genuine portraits, creates characters in the flesh who speak and think according to the letter and spirit of their own letters, but the correspondence moves and manifests itself epically in the critic’s direction. This is as in the polyphonic novel, when the author seems distanced and neutral [...], when the narrator seems somewhat closer to some situations”<sup>43</sup>.

In fact, he is simply a “writer of criticism” (a phrase used both at the beginning and at the end of the portrait):

Rarely have critical intelligence (that is, the power of understanding and interpretation of a text, the analytical finesse, the subtlety of dissociations) and literary talent (that is, the art of being expressive, of giving good thought to the colour of the beautifully expressed) been intertwined so harmoniously and convincingly as in his case, and often reading his critical texts produces a joy similar to that of reading a very good novel<sup>44</sup>.

The critic focuses on what we could call the “critical imagination”<sup>45</sup>. It is not by chance that all these critics have an obvious appetite for parody, mannerism, artifice and other formal excesses. Their critical demonstrations are also real aesthetic shows. In extreme cases (such as Ion Vartic’s writings), theatricality

<sup>41</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 497: “un exemplu, printre cele mai înalte din promoție, de ‘teribilă potriveală’, sub cerul transparenței, a scriiturii artistice la gândirea speculativă”, “talent literar cu temă critică”.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 472: “Obiectul cărții nu este opera scriitorilor, ci persoana lor întreagă (comportament, mentalitate, psihologie) așa cum se revelează ea în corespondența purtată de scriitori cu alți scriitori”.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 473: “Sub aparența descrierii și conspectării corespondenței scriitorilor, Livius Ciocârlie face de fapt portretistică veritabilă, creează personaje în carne și oase care vorbesc și gândesc în litera și în spiritul propriilor scrisori, dar se mișcă și se manifestă epic în regia criticului. Acesta este, ca în romanul polifonic, când autorul distanțat și neutru [...], când naratorul ceva mai apropiat al unor situații”.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 474: “Rareori inteligența critică (adică puterea de înțelegere și interpretare a unui text, finețea analitică, subtilitatea disocierilor) și talentul literat (adică arta de a fi expresiv, de a da bine gânditului culoarea frumos exprimatului) s-au împletit atât de armonios și de convingător ca în cazul său și deseori lectura textelor sale critice produce o bucurie similară cu a lecturii unui foarte bun roman”.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 499: “imaginație critică”.

informs the very stakes of the critic's biographical choices.

What kind of texts does, for instance, Andrei Pleșu write? To Ulici, *Minima moralia* is “the ballad with elegiac breezes of a high-class intellectual who, fearing to meet Oedipus (how productive and how justified the theme!), refuses to wear, even for therapeutic purposes, the mask of the sphinx”<sup>46</sup>. As elsewhere, here too Ulici makes a statement that applies, by extension, to the entire generation discussed. Memorable, this statement fascinates even though it deceives; it is a memorable statement as it refers to the truth. This kind of criticism no longer believes in truth, but in hypotheses, in argumentative scenarios, in critical fictions. The entire generation under discussion shows something of a keen sense of powerlessness – and then it turns powerlessness into victory, into the plenary, or rather exhibited, manifestation of the subject and its possibilities of interpretation. In fact, here even the “fanatics” are playing. That is why the truth does not seem to matter. There is no single truth. Any truth is illusion, and critics build illusions. The lack of truth, in all cases, is not a justification for opportunism and chameleonism, but a way of re-establishing, *in extremis*, the subject, the critic as the true centre of his interpretation.

Let me end my discussion on this particular tone by reminding us all that with such self-posing, demonstrative performances, criticism saves itself precisely from the consciousness (enacted by each interpretation) of its Sisyphean powerlessness. In this case, its demonstrative show is, in fact, an anti-show.

It is precisely from this consciousness of powerlessness that emerges, in one form or another, the salvation of criticism, as well as of literature. In fact, after the Theses of July 1971<sup>47</sup>, allowing the literary work to be a space of “infinite semiosis”, of the playful and the speculative (if not sepulchral) was not only a long shot, but a validation of the liberal vision which, hidden in the peripheral act of literary criticism, tried to survive. Ulici's words are eloquent for such a perspective on criticism:

And when criticism comes to know and recognize this property of literature (what else is “textualization?!”), what would be left to do? Modern criticism, in the “semiotic” and “textual” variants, has discovered what literature is, the matter from which it is made, its body, so to speak, telluric. But it discovered something else: that this body is inhabited by another one, immaterial, let us call it ethereal, for which for now (fortunately!) it cannot account, more precisely it cannot say anything more than it succeeded to say by pre-structuralist methods. But even so, by illuminating in the anatomy of the work, the “newer” criticism is worthy of all respect as well as of as much compassion, as it shows to the “older” critics that both end up practically at the

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<sup>46</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 497: “balada cu adieri elegiace a unui intelectual de mare clasă, care de teama întâlnirii cu Oedip (ce productivă și cât de justificată temă!) refuză să poarte, fie și din necesități terapeutice, masca sfinxului”.

<sup>47</sup> Promoting Ceaușescu's decision to restore the ideological control in literature.



same point: before the mystery in the living heart of the work, before the invisible thread that connects it to the living heart of the reader and that electrifies, unpredictable and fatal, two “electrical bodies”: the soul of man and the spirit of the word, complementary and reactive entities. However, the “newer” criticism still has merits that are insufficiently emphasized: in its autonomy hubris, translated with sublime hypocrisy by a perfect, in appearance, submission to the literary object, it is the least illusionistic of all<sup>48</sup>.

*De me fabula narrator*, one could say, as this long passage is certainly also about Ulici himself and his way of posing as a literary critic of his generation.

The idea appears a few more times, even if not as accurately as here. In the discussion about Livius Ciocârlie, Ulici resumes the idea that, by talking about the life of writers, he would lower them to the level of the average person. Talking about the writers’ correspondence is like looking through the keyhole into their private lives. How does Livius Ciocârlie defend himself against such an accusation?! Says Ulici: “Familiarity with artists, if it does not have a petty motivation, for example to ‘shrink them, to prove to you that they are also like you, if you do not hurt anyone’, is welcome, as ‘it increases their mystery and brings you closer to a miracle’”<sup>49</sup>. So, literature as a *miracle*, provided with an *invisible aura*, the written text as a *mystery*. Here is what is at stake in the liberal view of literature. This is, after all, Ulici’s critical program. He foresaw, however, that if it were to save itself, literary criticism could do so precisely by leaving its the pedestal and giving up power. As a text, it is itself a mystery and it asks for interpretation.

Favourable to new methods, which he considers absolutely necessary, even more so as they make the difference possible (after all, as many methods, at least as many works in a text, or texts in a work), Ulici considers criticism, precisely the

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<sup>48</sup> Laurențiu Ulici, *Literatura română contemporană*, p. 483: “Și când critica ajunge să cunoască și să recunoască această proprietate a literaturii (ce altceva e ‘textualizarea?!’), ce-ar mai rămâne de făcut? Critica modernă, în variantele ‘semiotică’ și ‘textuală’ mai cu seamă, a descoperit ce este literatura, materia din care e făcută, corpul ei, ca să zic așa, teluric. A mai descoperit însă ceva: că acest corp e locuit de un altul, imaterial, să-i zicem eteric, despre care deocamdată (din fericire!) nu poate da seamă, mai exact nu poate spune nici mai mult și nici altceva decât reușea prin metodele prestructuraliste. Dar și așa, făcând lumină în anatomia operei, critica mai ‘nouă’ e demnă de tot respectul precum și de tot atâta compasiune câtă arată ea criticii mai ‘vechi’, pentru că amândouă sfârșesc practic în același punct: înaintea tainei din inima vie a operei, înaintea firului invizibil care o leagă pe aceasta de inima vie a cititorului și care electrizează, imprevizibil și fatal, două ‘corpuri electrice’: sufletul omului și spiritul cuvântului, entități complementare și reactive. Cu toate astea, critica mai ‘nouă’ are încă merite insuficient subliniat: în orgoliul ei autonomist, tradus cu sublimă ipocrizie printr-o desăvârșită, în aparență, supunere față de obiectul literar, ea e cea mai puțin iluzionistă dintre toate”.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 473: “Familiaritatea cu artiștii dacă nu are o motivație meschină, de pildă aceea de a-i ‘micșora, pentru a-ți dovedi că sunt și ei ca și tine, dacă nu mai răi’, e binevenită – continuă criticul – întrucât ‘le sporește misterul și te aduce în preajma unui miracol’”.

one manifest under the sign of hypothetical, play, relativism, etc., as a validation of his point of view. After all, from a position of defeat, that is, as subject to contexts, criticism recoils easily, as in a Japanese wrestling exercise, by simulating a retreat in order to re-establish itself, and thus to re-establish the hidden meaning of art, which is difficult to record and even more difficult to build on command. All this also speaks of the victory of the spirit in dictatorial times.

In summary, here is how the '70s critic appears in Ulici's vision:

- Timorous and dominated by hubris, in the absence of external public support he will initially reach out to the protective space of incisive but alienating methods, only to reach the opposite pole later by placing himself in the foreground;
- He refuses the scene of immediate literary life, just as he refuses the public scene, taking refuge if not in the academy, then on a stage accessible only to experts or on one reflected in the mirror. Devoid of narcissism, this critic is, in fact, his double;
- As his double, he enacts only the hypostasis of possessing the truth, for which it is worth fighting. But literature is a more comprehensive ground than one thinks, and in penetrating its mystery he can make use of various, even excessive, scenarios and argumentative architectures. With these assumptions of interpretation, literature builds itself first and foremost;
- Although he has a culture of dialogue, he loves monologue; isolated, he could be likened to Odysseus, who, "chained to the mast, in his restrained life, is in a way the first actor regarded with a false detachment by his first audience, the sailor with wax in his ears"<sup>50</sup>.
- If anything, the '70s critic is an ironist. As if he didn't know that there are filiations to maintain and to honour – the forerunners of the field, such as Călinescu or Lovinescu – he is willing to play with suicidal gravity, taking a step back from the turret, but also from the pedestal or from the rostrum, descending into the sophisticated fabric of the subject, in search of a precarious identity that proves to be his very own identity, to which all that precedes seems merely a means of access. He is fascinated by the hypothetical and takes refuge in the text. For the text – which has become the world – is his salvation.

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<sup>50</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 498: "înlănțuit de catarg, în trăirea-i dezlănțuită, este într-un fel primul actor privit cu mincinoasă detașare de întâiul public, corăbierii cu ceară în urechi"

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THE IRONIC SPIRIT IN THE CRITICISM OF THE ROMANIAN '70S  
GENERATION  
(Abstract)

The premise that this article is built upon is that, following the political liberation of the 1968–1971 period in Romania and the placing of literature under the sign of political dogmatism after 1971, the literary criticism of 1970s generation defined itself as a space of refuge for the liberal spirit. The form that this spirit took was that of irony, not in the typical sense of the term, that of expressing force, but in that in which Rorty uses it, meaning disbelief in the force. The analysis that I propose uses as a starting point the perspective proposed by Laurențiu Ulici, the most active figure in the public space created by the literary critics of his generation and also the most representative figure of that liberal spirit and of its relation to the sense of irony. Thus, my study tries to identify the most important traits

of the ironic spirit of 1970s criticism and illustrates them by discussing the vision of the main literary critics of Ulici's generation after having defined this ironic spirit through Richard Rorty's theory.

*Keywords:* irony, literary criticism, the '70s generation, Richard Rorty, Laurentiu Ulici.

### SPIRITUL *IRONIC* ÎN CRITICA GENERAȚIEI '70 (*Rezumat*)

Premisa de la care pornește studiul de față este că, în urma liberalizării politice din anii 1968-1971 și a resituării literaturii sub semnul dogmatismului politic de după 1971, critica literară românească s-a definit ca spațiu de refugiu pentru spiritul liberal. Iar forma de manifestare a acestui spirit a fost ironia, nu în sensul consacrat al termenului, de exprimare a forței, ci în sensul lui Rorty, folosit ca referință, de neîncredere în forță. Analiza pe care o fac pornește de la viziunea lui Laurențiu Ulici, figura cea mai implicată în spațiul public dintre criticii generației sale, dar și cea mai reprezentativă pentru felul în care ironia înseamnă spirit liberal, asupra propriei generații. Studiul identifică trăsăturile definitorii ale spiritului ironic din critica generației '70, le ilustrează prin trimitere la criticii reprezentativi ai generației, după ce, anterior, definise spiritul ironic prin intermediul lui Richard Rorty.

*Cuvinte-cheie:* ironie, critică literară, generația '70, Richard Rorty, Laurențiu Ulici.