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AVANT-PROPOS

Il y a une longue « histoire » de l'ironie et de ses acceptions littéraires à commencer par la modernité et jusqu'à l'âge contemporain : de *l'ironie romantique*, esthétique, philosophiquement réappropriée par les romantiques allemands et associée à la littérature, en tant que vision du monde et pratique discursive, à *l'ironie moderne*, de nature éthique, démocratisée avec l'expérience traumatique de la Première Guerre Mondiale¹, enfin à *l'ironie postmoderne*, comprise soit comme mode de lecture² soit comme mode de vie³. Toutes ces postures de la distance ironique et leur inscription historique appartiennent pourtant à un récit occidental. Elles visent un processus de constitution du sujet, des phénomènes d'émancipation individuelle ou des manières de réagir à des traumatismes collectifs, propres aux sociétés de la « vieille Europe ». Mais quels problèmes sociaux, politiques, éthiques l'ironie résout-elle, comme figure de style et comme forme de vie, dans les espaces marginaux du continent ? Comment cette figure millénaire s'est-elle engagée dans les phénomènes d'émergence des sociétés modernes en Europe orientale et centrale ? Comment s'est-elle articulée avec les thèmes du « romantisme apprivoisé » que ces cultures « récentes » ont connus ? Comment l'ironie a-t-elle participé à l'absorption du cauchemar concentrationnaire dans les anciens États communistes au-delà du rideau de fer ?

Dans la littérature de l'Europe centrale et orientale, l'ironie et l'humour ont tendance à avoir un profil particulier, fonctionnant depuis le XIX^{ème} siècle comme des solutions discursives pour la discipline sociale ou équilibrant certains écarts culturels et civilisationnels par rapport à l'Occident, afin d'acquérir, dans le contexte de la période communiste qui couvre la seconde moitié du XX^{ème} siècle, la valeur de stratégies subversives et « démocratisantes » par rapport au pouvoir politique⁴. En proposant un tel numéro thématique à la revue *Dacoromania litteraria*, nous avons considéré, en principe, que l'investigation minutieuse des enjeux idéologiques et éthiques de l'ironie littéraire est loin d'avoir épuisé ses ressources et qu'une remise en cause des pratiques de la dérision comme forme de

¹ Pierre Schoentjes, *Poétique de l'ironie*, Paris, Seuil, 2001.

² Paul de Man, *Aesthetic Ideology*. Introduction par Andrzej Warminski, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1996.

³ Gilles Deleuze, « La loi, l'humour, l'ironie », in *Présentation de Sacher-Masoch. Le froid et le cruel*, Paris, Les Editions de Minuit, 2007, pp. 69-77.

⁴ Viloric Melor, *L'arme du rire. L'humour dans les pays de l'Est*, Paris, Editions Ramsay, 1979 ; cf. également Corina Croitoru, *Politica ironiei în poezia românească sub comunism [La politique de l'ironie dans la poésie roumaine sous le communisme]*, Cluj-Napoca, Casa Cărții de Știință, 2014.

résistance dans des conditions géopolitiques en marche pouvait générer un point de départ pour de nouvelles recherches interdisciplinaires. Si nos postulats étaient enracinés dans les réalités historico-géographiques de l'Europe centrale, post-communiste, nous espérons aussi que le sujet suscite l'intérêt des spécialistes extérieurs à cette zone – et extérieurs à notre champ strict.

La réflexion sur l'ironie, aujourd'hui, ne peut ignorer la perpétuation et l'épanouissement du discours oblique dans la littérature et dans la presse écrite, après la chute du régime communiste. Ces derniers, regardés de près et analysés dans leurs occurrences concrètes, contribuent à élargir la perspective sur le rapport inconfortable que les communautés entretiennent avec les réalités socio-politiques à chaque époque historique – et dont la littérature, comme les autres arts, témoigne, respectivement, que la littérature in-forme. Suivant un autre versant du débat actuel, les enquêtes critiques auraient pu porter également sur le concept de post-ironie, important pour le paradigme culturel post-postmoderne et essentiel pour définir la direction née dans l'espace américain sous le nom de New Sincerity⁵ : mais est-ce que cela est bien identifiable dans la matière du paradigme à partir duquel et dont, ici et maintenant, on parle ? Et l'impossibilité pour nous, les commentateurs, de nous éloigner de ce paradigme, lui-même d'une irréductible vulnérabilité, ne mérite pas, à son tour, un regard ironique ? Nous avons donc proposé à nos collaborateurs une « reconstitution commentée » de quelque chose que nous identifions bien plus facilement que nous ne pouvons le définir, avec tous les risques qu'implique une telle proximité, thématiquement focalisée, aux figures de la distance du sujet – et qui viennent ajouter, nous l'espérons, un surcroît d'attractivité aux approches rassemblées dans la synthèse qui suit.

S'intéressant à l'éthique et aux politiques de l'ironie dans la littérature roumaine, ce volume rassemble, en conséquence, plusieurs études qui discutent les pratiques de la dérision comme forme de résistance dans les conditions géopolitiques difficiles d'une Roumanie située, pour quatre décennies, derrière le Rideau de Fer. Pourtant, les articles présents ne s'arrêtent pas seulement à la littérature roumaine qui exploite l'ironie durant le régime communiste, mais descendent aussi à la littérature roumaine ou norvégienne du XIX^{ème}, remontent à des auteurs roumains ou français contemporains et suivent maintes fois le scalpel de l'ironie dans le discours de la critique littéraire. Afin de mieux cerner les approches des spécialistes qui ont participé à la réalisation de ce numéro, les coordinatrices ont décidé d'organiser les contributions scientifiques dans trois groupages : I. *Enjeux éthiques de l'ironie dans le discours critique*, II. *Figures est-européennes de l'ironie littéraire : le cas roumain*, III. *Ironie au Nord, ironie à*

⁵ David Foster Wallace, *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again: Essays and Arguments*, Boston, Little, Brown and Co, 1997.

l'Ouest. Cette structuration du sommaire aide à délimiter les enjeux critiques de chaque auteur et à éclairer le territoire méthodologique du débat.

Le premier groupage témoigne d'un grand intérêt pour l'exercice méta-critique, regroupant des articles passionnés et passionnants sur la stylistique ironique des critiques littéraires. Il s'ouvre par l'article d'Arleen Ionescu sur l'ironie du dramaturge Eugène Ionesco, telle qu'elle est mise en œuvre lors des deux polémiques portées par celui-ci avec Roland Barthes et respectivement Bernard Dort, une ironie qui s'origine, selon l'auteure, dans le premier livre d'essais critiques publié en 1934 par l'écrivain roumain d'expression française. Faisant le saut de la « génération '27 » à la « génération de la guerre », l'article signé par Ionucu Pop est consacré à l'ironie de Ion Negoitescu, membre du Cercle Littéraire de Sibiu, qui fait appel à cette stratégie de la dérision dans ses pages de critique et d'histoire littéraire, aussi bien que dans ses notes autobiographiques et dans sa correspondance. Le découpage avance chronologiquement vers la matière de l'étude de Jessica Andreoli, qui commente minutieusement l'ironie développée par Rosa del Conte, critique et traductrice italienne de la littérature roumaine, dans un essai des années '60 dédié à la traduction « infidèle » de la poésie de Tudor Arghezi en italien, réalisée par Salvatore Quasimodo. Ensuite, l'article de Mircea A. Diaconu surprend la manière dont l'ironie s'est manifestée astucieusement comme espace de refuge dans le discours critique roumain des années '70, notamment dans les textes de Laurențiu Ulici, durant une période idéologiquement néfaste, tandis que celui de Mădălina Agoston focalise sur la relation entre ironie et mélancolie chez Jean Starobinski, observant l'impact des ouvrages du critique genevois dans le contexte culturel roumain à partir des années '70 et jusqu'aux années '90.

Le deuxième groupage penche vers l'histoire et la sociologie littéraire, s'ouvrant à la poétique et à la narratologie, et réunit plusieurs articles qui s'occupent de l'ironie littéraire chez les écrivains roumains, à commencer par la relecture de la prose autochtone de la seconde moitié du XIX^{ème}, effectuée par Lavinia Sabou sur le fil rouge d'une ironie élitiste, romantique, qui sanctionne le décalage civilisationnel Orient-Occident, à laquelle vient se rajouter l'exégèse de Corina Croitoru sur la poésie roumaine des deux guerres mondiales, où l'accent tombe sur l'emploi d'une ironie moderne, éthique, tournée contre les réalités du front et contre le contexte historique hostile qui leur a donné naissance. Respectant toujours le critère chronologique des époques littéraires, la sélection s'enrichit avec une ample analyse que l'angliciste Mihaela Mudure entreprend pour mettre en évidence l'usage swiftien de l'ironie dans deux romans roumains subversifs appartenant à la période communiste et post-communiste, des romans signés par Ion Eremia, respectivement par Mircea Opriță. De son côté, Christinne Schmidt se lance à une interprétation de l'ironie identifiée dans les mémoires d'Annie Bentoiu, écrits à la même époque communiste, une ironie vue comme écart par rapport aux normes du discours mémoriel. Avec la recherche de Cristian Pașcalău,

la prose ironique roumaine revient au centre de l'attention critique, mais avance vers les années 2000, exploitant l'imaginaire narratif de Petru Cimpoeșu, tendance prolongée avec l'approche proposée par Ioana Bot autour de la prose récente de Mircea Cărtărescu, où l'œil du poéticien découvre et dévoile les mécanismes de construction de l'ironie poétique suivant l'axe thématique des filiations littéraires.

Enfin, le troisième découpage s'éloigne de l'espace culturel est-européen et de son histoire politiquement imbriquée, pour découvrir avec Ana Suărășan l'usage de l'ironie comme instrument critique dans l'œuvre de la première écrivaine féministe norvégienne du XIX^{ème} siècle, Camilla Collett, pour s'arrêter finalement à la littérature française contemporaine, à la suggestion de Marius Popa qui, ayant choisi l'exemple de Michel Houellebecq, explique comment le concept d'ironie a été substantiellement rétabli au sein de la nouvelle épistémè post-humaine.

Sans la prétention d'avoir illustré un usage fondamentalement nouveau de l'ironie, cette incursion dans la littérature roumaine, partie intégrante de la famille littéraire est-européenne, a cependant le mérite d'avoir essayé de montrer la spécificité du concept dans une culture touchée, au XIX^{ème} siècle, par un complexe d'infériorité par rapport à l'Occident, au XX^{ème} siècle, par le bacille du totalitarisme après le trauma des deux guerres mondiales, et, au XXI^{ème} siècle, par le syndrome d'une éternelle transition vers une intouchable démocratie authentique. Comprise dans sa relation avec le contexte social, politique et idéologique de chaque période historique, l'ironie qui constitue le sujet privilégié des démarches ci-jointes se présente dans la poésie, comme dans la prose, dans le théâtre, comme dans les mémoires, et bien évidemment dans la critique littéraire dans toute sa splendeur subversive, c'est-à-dire insoumise et idéaliste.

PERFORMING IRONY: EUGÈNE IONESCO'S BATTLES WITH HIS CRITICS

After Aristotle's first definition of irony as duality: blame-by-praise or praise-by-blame¹, and Cicero's first use of "ironia", attested by *The Oxford English Dictionary*, irony has been defined as "a figure of speech in which the intended meaning is the opposite of that expressed by the words used; usually taking the form of sarcasm or ridicule in which laudatory expressions are used to imply condemnation or contempt", or as a "condition of affairs or events of a character opposite to what was, or might naturally be, expected"².

D.C. Muecke's comprehensive *The Compass of Irony* which analyses the formal qualities of irony and offers a survey of its various forms, functions and cultural significance started on an astute comment pointing to the impossibility of formally defining irony: "Since [...] Erich Heller, in his *Ironic German*, has already quite adequately not defined irony, there would be little point in not defining it all over again"³. Muecke's next book, *Irony and the Ironic*, devised 15 descriptive types of irony that the English literary-educated person would recognize⁴, traced the evolution of the concept, and investigated its anatomy.

Wayne Booth asserted that "[r]eading irony is in some ways like translating, like decoding, like deciphering and like peering behind a mask"⁵ and devised four "marks of irony": irony is always intended, not unconscious; it is covert ("intended to be reconstructed with meanings different from those on the surface"); it is stable or fixed ("in the sense that once a reconstruction of meaning has been made, the reader is not then invited to undermine it with further demolitions and reconstructions"); finally, it is "finite in application", since "[t]he reconstructed meanings are in some sense local, limited"⁶. Booth explained that these marks do not suffice to distinguish irony from other verbal devices saying something and intending another (metaphor, simile, allegory, apologue, metonymy, synecdoche, asteismus, micterismus, charientismus, preterition, banter raillery, burlesque, and paronomasia)⁷. This is not the only limitation of fully comprehending irony, and

¹ Aristotle, *Rhetoric*. Translated by J.E.C. Welldon, London, Macmillan, 1886.

² *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (CD-ROM, version 4.0.0.2, 2009), s.v. "irony".

³ D.C. Muecke, *The Compass of Irony*, London and New York, Methuen, 1980 [1969], p. 14.

⁴ D.C. Muecke, *Irony and the Ironic*, London and New York, Methuen, 1982, pp. 8-13.

⁵ Wayne C. Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony*, Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 1975, p. 33.

⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 5-6.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 7.

we can add, as Stanley Fish pointed out in his critique of Booth's theory, that "not everyone is certain in the same way"⁸.

Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson limited irony to opposition, placing it within the larger category of humour based on incongruity, incompatibility or contradiction, among others⁹. Looking back at the three main theories of humour (superiority¹⁰, incongruity¹¹ and relief)¹², one can find many similarities with irony, especially in the case of incongruity which is reached through a multitude of devices, including irony, "bathos, puns, wordplay, ambiguity, incongruity, deviation, black humour, misunderstandings, iconoclasm, grotesquerie, out-of-placeness, doubling, absurdity, nonsense, blunders, defamiliarization, quick changes and hyperbole"¹³.

Attempting to go beyond the "axiological" or evaluative assessment of irony, Linda Hutcheon focused on the interpreter of irony rather than on the ironist's intentions. In her view, irony "happens" within a pre-existing "discursive" community and that the task of the interpreter in "making irony happen" is to determine the "circumstantial, textual, and intertextual environment of the passage in question"¹⁴.

In her comprehensive survey of the history and structure of irony from Socrates to the present, Claire Colebrook defined irony as a trope that "allows the speaker to remain 'above' what he says, allowing those members of his audience who share his urbanity to perceive the true sense of what is really meant"¹⁵,

⁸ Stanley Fish, *Doing What Comes Naturally*, Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 1989, p. 182.

⁹ Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson, *Some Universals in Language Usage*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1987.

¹⁰ The superiority theory, put forward by Plato, Aristotle, Thomas Hobbes, René Descartes, G.W.F. Hegel, Henri Bergson and Charles Baudelaire, identified comic amusement with "vain glory and an argument of little worth, to think the infirmities of another, sufficient matter for his triumph." (Thomas Hobbes, *Human Nature and De Corpore Politico*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 55).

¹¹ The incongruity theory, conceived by Francis Hutcheson, John Locke, Blaise Pascal, Immanuel Kant, William Hazlitt, Arthur Schopenhauer, regards humour in terms of transgression or deviation.

¹² The relief theory, defined by Alexander Bain, Anthony Ashley Cooper, Herbert Spencer, John Dewey and Sigmund Freud, investigates the relation of laughter to the nervous system (John Morreall, *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor*, Foreword by Robert Mankoff, Oxford, Wiley-Blackwell, 2009, pp. 15-16) and starts from the assumption that humour is not "resigned" but "rebellious" (Sigmund Freud, *Art and Literature: Jensen's Gradiva, Leonardo da Vinci and Other Works*. Translated by James Strachey, edited by Albert Dickson, Penguin Freud Library, vol. 14. Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1990 [1927], p. 429). Its origins can be traced in a debate between Spencer and Bain (Michael Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule: Towards a Social Critique of Humour*, London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi, Sage Publications, 2005, p. 86).

¹³ Terry Eagleton, *Humour*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2019, p. 88.

¹⁴ Linda Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony*, London and New York, Routledge, 2005, p. 137.

¹⁵ Claire Colebrook, *Irony*, London and New York, Routledge, 2005, p. 19.

pointing to its elitist features: “to say one thing and mean another, or to say something contrary to what is understood, relies on the possibility that those who are not enlightened or privy to the context will be excluded”¹⁶.

In the light of these theories, this article “reads” irony in two critical disputes involving playwright Eugène Ionesco (1909–1994). French criticism associated his work with the avant-garde theatre in the 1950s, and Martin Esslin included in “the Theatre of the Absurd” in his eponymous book which investigates the plays of Samuel Beckett, Ionesco, Arthur Adamov, Jean Genet and a few other avant-garde writers from Europe and The United States, starting from a definition of the absurd given by Ionesco himself in an essay on Kafka: (“that which is devoid of purpose”)¹⁷.

My reading of irony will go progressively from the presentation of some biographical details that are essential for understanding the context of Ionesco's irony, which was clearly addressed to the elites, to Ionesco's first exercise of style in irony, a book of criticism, and eventually to the analysis of two main debates around his theatre: one (both critical and creative) in Paris and one in London.

Theatrical Irony in Criticism: Ionesco's Nu

Born in Romania of a Romanian father, Eugen Ionescu, and presumably a French (in reality, Jewish-Romanian) mother, Thérèse Ipcar¹⁸, Ionesco lived between two languages and cultures. As a child he was raised by his mother in France and as an adolescent and a young man in Romania he lived with his father.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 18.

¹⁷ Eugène Ionesco, “Dans les Armes de la Ville”, *Cahiers de la Compagnie Madeleine Renaud-Jean-Louis Barrault*, 20 (Octobre 1957), quoted in Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, New York, Anchor Books, 1961, p. xix. According to Michael Y. Bennett, Esslin mistranslated “but” from Ionesco's “Est absurde ce qui n'a pas de but [...]” as “purpose” instead of “goal”, “target” or “end”, ignoring that Ionesco might have formulated a different definition that was closer to Camus and did not actually relate the absurd as lacking purpose. (Michael Y. Bennett, *Reassessing the Theatre of the Absurd: Camus, Beckett, Ionesco, Genet, and Pinter*, Houndmills, Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2011, pp. 9-10).

¹⁸ Ana-Maria Stan's archival work proves that although Ionesco always invoked the French origin of his mother, she was actually born in Craiova, where Ipcar was a common Sephardic name. (*Relațiile franco-române în timpul regimului de la Vichy 1940–1944 [Franco-Romanian Relations During the Vichy Regime 1940–1941]*, Cluj-Napoca, Argonaut, 2006, pp. 485-486). For Ionesco's biography, see also Alexandra Laignel-Lavastine, *Cioran, Eliade, Ionesco. L'oubli du fascisme*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 2002; André Le Gall, *Eugène Ionesco. Mise en scène d'un existant spécial en son œuvre et en son temps*, Paris, Flammarion, 2008; Julia Elsky, “Eugène Ionesco, 1942–1944: Political and Cultural Transfers between Romania and France”, *Diasporas*, 23-24, 2014, pp. 200-214.

Ionesco started a doctoral degree in France in 1938, which he never finished, returning to Romania in 1940, and departing to France again in 1942 as one of the press secretaries for the National Ministry of Propaganda. In the 1940s, the Romanian fascist movement had become too dangerous for Ionesco, who finally confessed his secret to his Jewish friend Mihail Sebastian. Sebastian's diary (26 March 1941) reveals that Ionesco had become aware that "not even the name 'Ionescu', nor an indisputable Romanian father, nor the fact that he was born Christian – nothing at all can hide the curse of having Jewish blood in his veins"¹⁹. Ionesco's *Rhinoceros* captures the moment when his character Bérenger witnesses bewilderingly the "rhinocerization" of most of his close friends, Mircea Eliade, Emil Cioran and Mircea Vulcănescu, who admired the Iron Guard, the infamous far-right ultra-nationalist, anti-Semitic and anti-capitalist movement led by Corneliu Zelea Codreanu²⁰. However, "rhinocerization", the disease tied to the rise of fascism that many of his friends and even his own father caught, can be actually seen as a more extended metaphor of his rejection of any form of totalitarianism. As this article will demonstrate, Ionesco's critics were equally associated with the totalitarianism of any ideology, which Ionesco regarded as a collective disease²¹ and permanently ironized throughout his entire work.

By the time Ionesco left Romania, he had written only one book, *Nu* [*No*, 1934], situated "somewhere between literary criticism, essay and intimate diary", "aimed at ridiculing the institution of literary criticism from the perspective of a relativism of values"²². Although often neglected by criticism, *Nu* is essential for understanding Ionesco's irony, since it represents what Hutcheon calls the pre-existing element where irony "happened"²³. Following Hutcheon, I will determine the "circumstantial, textual, and intertextual environment"²⁴ of Ionesco's irony in *Nu* which was characterized by many scholars as "theatrical", hence, for instance, Șerban Cioculescu's recommendations to Ionesco to try the dramatic genre rather than write books on criticism²⁵.

¹⁹ Mihail Sebastian, *Journal 1935–1944*. Translated by Patrick Camiller. Introduction and notes by Radu Ioanid, Chicago, Ivan R. Dee, 2000, p. 335.

²⁰ For a detailed history of this episode in his life, see Cristina A. Bejan, *Intellectuals and Fascism in Interwar Romania: The Criterion Association*, Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.

²¹ See Eugène Ionesco, "Preface to *Rhinoceros*", November 1960, in *Notes and Counter Notes: Writings on the Theatre*. Translated by Donald Watson, New York, Grove Press, 1964, p. 198.

²² Paul Cernat, "The Young Eugen Ionescu between Dada Existentialism and the Balkan Tradition of the Absurd", *World Literature Studies*, 2, 2015, 7, p. 38.

²³ Linda Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge*, p. 137.

²⁴ *Ibidem*.

²⁵ Șerban Cioculescu, "Operele premiate ale scriitorilor tineri needitați (Eugen Ionescu, *Nu*)" ["The Award-Winning Works of the Unpublished Young Romanian Writers (Eugen Ionescu, *No*)"], *Revista Fundațiilor Regale*, 1, 1934, 9, pp. 653–655. All translations from Romanian and French are mine, unless otherwise stated. For Ionesco's Romanian career, see, among others, Gelu Ionescu's *Anatomia unei negații. Scrierile lui Eugen Ionescu în limba română. 1927–1940* [*The Anatomy of a Negation*:

According to Jeanine Teodorescu, “Ionesco assailed norms, received ideas, political trends, literary fashions and tradition itself” in *Nu*, which was, in short, “as scandalous as his debut as a playwright: everyone felt insulted”²⁶, since he demolished in grand style practically all his contemporaries’ works²⁷. Ionesco ironized the highly acclaimed poet Tudor Arghezi (1880–1967) whom he found a rather artificial poet and Baudelaire’s imitator: “we should keep him in this literary empyrean, on this throne at whose foot the adoring and ecstatic Romanian critics come in succession to prostrate themselves and to deposit offerings, myrrh and incense”²⁸. For Teodorescu, “[m]yth, ‘literary empyrean’, Arghezi on a ‘throne’ and Romanian critics as a ‘myrrh-and-incense-offering crowd’ in a temple honouring the poet-God describe the Ionescian theatrical picture of the state of poetry and criticism in his native country”²⁹. Ionesco’s verbal irony is addressed mostly to Arghezi’s admirers. As Muecke showed, “[t]he simplest form of ‘high-relief’ verbal irony is the antiphrastic praise for blame”³⁰, which is precisely the focus of this fragment which congratulates Arghezi and his adulators, while meaning exactly the opposite. The hyperbole is, to follow Muecke’s theory, “the most obvious device of setting up what is being attacked”³¹. In addition, the sentence “we should keep him”, in which Ionesco playfully identifies himself with the critics he ironizes by using the first-person pronoun in plural (we), follows the trend of what Muecke called preterition, by which rhetoricians meant either “the ironic pretence either not to mention something (‘Far be it from me to say anything here of your...’) or that it is not worth mentioning”³².

Nu goes on tearing down other writers: the “narcissist” poet Ion Barbu (1895–1961), the Balkan “Monsieur Teste”, prose writer Camil Petrescu (1894–1957), whose borrowings from Proust turned into “recipes, clichés”, critics Pompiliu

Eugen Ionescu's Works in Romanian. 1927–1940], București, Minerva, 1991; Ecaterina Cleynen-Serghiev, *La Jeunesse littéraire d'Eugène Ionesco*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1993; Marie France Ionesco, *Portrait de l'écrivain dans le siècle Eugène Ionesco, 1909–1994*, Paris, Gallimard, 2004; Marta Petreu, *Ionescu în țara tatălui [Ionescu in His Father's Land]*, Iași, Polirom, 2012.

²⁶ Jeanine Teodorescu, “‘Nu, Nu and Nu’: Ionesco’s ‘No!’ to Romanian Literature and Politics”, *Journal of European Studies*, 34, 2004, 3, p. 268.

²⁷ To this, we can add Ionesco’s articles in literary journals which were later on collected in Eugène Ionesco, *Război cu toată lumea: publicistica românească [At War with Everybody: The Romanian Journalistic Writings]*, I. Edited and bibliography by Mariana Vartic and Aurel Sasu, București, Humanitas, 1992.

²⁸ Eugène Ionesco, *Non*. Translated by Marie-France Ionesco, Paris, Gallimard, 1986, p. 60. The Romanian text appeared in *Vremea* (1934) and was republished by Humanitas (1991 and 2011). I am using Jeanine Teodorescu’s translations from “‘Nu, Nu and Nu’”, p. 271.

²⁹ *Ibidem*.

³⁰ D.C. Muecke, *Irony and the Ironic*, p. 56.

³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 57.

³² *Ibidem*, p. 61.

Constantinescu (1901–1946), who limited himself to exegesis, E. Lovinescu (1881–1943) who was too lyrical, Perpessicius (1891–1971), who was influenced by Thibaudet’s stereotyped ideas, Șerban Cioculescu (1902–1988), who was a “myopic” sceptic, Petru Comarnescu (1905–1970), who was excessive, and Paul Sterian (1904–1984), whose criticism Ionesco associated to that of “an elephant in a China shop”³³.

My contention is that beyond the criticism addressed to writers, Ionesco would have already fought against another category of scholars who made writers famous and whom he was to despise for all his life – the literary critics. As Rosette C. Lamont asserted, in Ionesco’s opinion, “[t]he critics who sing the praises of [...] inferior writers do so in loosely impressionistic prose, utterly devoid of any objective standards of judgment.”³⁴ In order to demonstrate that “the work itself does not have an absolute value” and that we do not know where the truth actually lies³⁵, Ionesco produced two companion antithetical critical pieces on his friend Mircea Eliade’s novel *Maitreyi*.

To follow Teodorescu’s thought-provoking reading, the first sample of Ionesco’s work proves to what extent “theatricality was a tool of the critic Ionesco as well”³⁶. In Muecke’s acceptation, irony in criticism is connected to the “intaglio method”, which “isolates the butt or object of the irony”³⁷. This is exactly how Ionesco structured *Nu*, where we find latent motives that will be used repeatedly in his later plays and theoretical texts.

One of the motives Ionesco often used in his *Nu* was the “caricatured self-portraiture” that will actually represent the core of dramatic irony in the play about his French critics, *L’Impromptu de l’Alma ou Le Caméléon du Berger* [*Improvisation or the Shepherd’s Chameleon*]. In *Nu* we also find a Romanian Ionesco of Caragiale descent³⁸, whose humour, condescension, sarcasm and irony are typically Eastern European, and an avant-garde writer who plays with the absurd similarly to Urmuz, whose admirer he was, hailing him, as I mentioned elsewhere, “as a precursor of European modernism”³⁹.

³³ Eugène Ionesco, *Non*, pp. 90-91; 75-76; 117.

³⁴ Rosette C. Lamont, *Ionesco’s Imperatives: The Politics of Culture*, Ann Arbor, MI, The University of Michigan Press, 1993, p. 5.

³⁵ *Ibidem*.

³⁶ Jeanine Teodorescu, “‘Nu, Nu and Nu’”, p. 268.

³⁷ D.C. Muecke, *Irony and the Ironic*, p. 57.

³⁸ Ionesco not only loved Ion Luca Caragiale (1852–1912), the most important Romanian playwright, but he also translated (with Monica Lovinescu) *O scrisoare pierdută* [*A Lost Letter*] into French for *L’Arche* (1994). The translation is perhaps one of Ionesco’s failures, because of its normalization that does not work with the “untranslatables” of this play. For one of the best translations of Caragiale, see Ion Luca Caragiale, *Œuvres*. Préface et notes de Silvian Iosifesco. Textes traduits sous la direction de Simone Roland et de Valentin Lipatti, București, Meridiane, 1962.

³⁹ Arleen Ionescu, *Romanian Joyce: From Hostility to Hospitality*, Frankfurt am Main, Peter Lang, 2014, p. 34.

Ionesco can also be compared to his compatriot and friend, philosopher-essayist Emil Cioran (1911–1995), who had changed his name into E.M. Cioran once he exiled himself in Paris and started to write in French, and who could not give up completely his Romanian identity either. Like Cioran, Ionesco refused to be a marginal, whose “aggrandized ego shifts the limelight from other critics to his own self-righteousness, which [...] adds to his bag of tricks and to the playful touch of his criticism”⁴⁰.

Dumitru Tucan also finds an affinity between Cioran and Ionesco in what he calls an authenticity based on “a negation of culture from the perspective of the need of an unusual existence which became ad-hoc at the level of discourse a mystic of difference.”⁴¹ It is not only this authenticity that brings them together but also the way in which they shaped their career. Their main Romanian books (Cioran’s *Pe culmile disperării* [*On the Heights of Despair*] and Ionesco’s *Nu*) were to haunt all the other French works. Many scholars have asserted that Cioran’s *On the Heights of Despair*, which the philosopher himself considered the quintessence of his work, includes *in nuce* the themes of all his subsequent writings: the decadence of Western liberal thought, the non-believer’s religious hopelessness, contempt for history, the enchantment of music, solitude, decay, decomposition, renunciation, suffering, insomnia and the temptation of suicide⁴². My contention is that not unlike Cioran’s *On the Heights of Despair*, Ionesco’s *Nu*

⁴⁰ Jeanine Teodorescu, “‘Nu, Nu and Nu’”, p. 276.

⁴¹ Dumitru Tucan, “Eugen Ionescu, *NU*: un binom paradoxal: cultură – existență (I)” [“Eugen Ionescu, *NO*: A Paradoxical Bynom: Culture–Existence”], *Transilvania*, 2006, 2, p. 38; see also “Eugen Ionescu, *NU*: un binom paradoxal: cultură – existență (II)”, *Transilvania*, 2006, 3, pp. 66–69.

⁴² I come back here to one of my ideas from “The Essay as Brinkmanship: Cioran’s Fragment, Aphorism and Autobiography”, in Mario Aquilina, Nicole Wallack and Bob Cowser Jnr (eds.), *The Edinburgh Companion to the Essay*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2022, 344 and from “‘Channels of Interference’: Maurice Blanchot and Emil Cioran”, *Primerjalna književnost*, 45, 2022, 1, pp. 189–208. See, among the many commentators on these themes, Emil Stan, *Cioran. Vitalitatea renunțării* [*Cioran: The Vitality of Renunciation*], Iași, Institutul European, 2005; Sylvain David, *Cioran: Un héroïsme à rebours*, Montreal, Presses Universitaires de Montréal, 2006; Nicolae Turcan, *Cioran sau excesul ca filosofie* [*Cioran or The Excess as Philosophy*]. Preface by Liviu Antonesei, Cluj-Napoca, Limes, 2008; Vincent Piednoir, *Cioran avant Cioran. Histoire d’une transfiguration*. Préface de Jacques Le Rider suivi d’un entretien inédit d’Emil Cioran avec Ben-Ami Fihman, Marseille, Éditions Gaussen, 2013; Joseph Acquisto, *The Fall Out of Redemption: Writing and Thinking Beyond Salvation in Baudelaire, Cioran, Fondane, Agamben, and Nancy*, New York and London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2015; Gina Puică et Vincent Piednoir, “Preface”, in E.M. Cioran, *Apologie de la barbarie. Berlin – Bucarest (1932–1941)*. Traductions du roumain par Liliana Nicorescu, Alain Paruit, Vincent Piednoir, Gina Puică. Preface par Gina Puică et Vincent Piednoir, Paris, Éditions de L’Herne, 2015, pp. 11–19; Ștefan Bolea, “Toward the ‘Never-Born’: Mainländer and Cioran”, *Revue Roumaine de Philosophie*, 65, 2021, 1, pp. 145–155. For Cioran’s irony, see also Marius Nica, “The Irony and Obsessions of Cioran’s Philosophy”, in Iulian Boldea, Cornel Sigmirean (eds.), *Multicultural Representations: Literature and Discourse as Forms of Dialogue*, Târgu Mureș, Arhipelag XXI Press, 2016, pp. 118–124, and Ștefan Bolea, *Existențialismul astăzi* [*Existentialism Today*], București, Eikon, 2019, pp. 394–396.

is the source wherefrom both the playful irony of his plays and that of his responses to critical debates originate. In order to see how irony manifested itself, I will first give a short chronology of Ionesco's plays and the critical debates that they produced initially in France, and, after his plays were translated into English and performed in London, in England.

The French Debates

Ionesco's first play *La Cantatrice chauve* (finalized in 1947, with its first Romanian draft under the title *L'Anglais sans professeur* finished in 1941 or 1942)⁴³ was performed under the direction of Nicolas Bataille at Noctambules in 1950. From 1950 onwards, Ionesco was highly productive, writing *La leçon* (1951) *Les Chaises* (1952), and *L'avenir est dans les œufs* (1952). 1953 marked the first performance of Samuel Beckett's *En attendant Godot*, under Roger Blin's direction at the Theatre de Babylone, of Ionesco's *La Cantatrice chauve* and *La Leçon* packed into a single show directed by Marcel Cuvelier at Théâtre de la Huchette, and of the première Ionesco's most autobiographical plays, *Victimes du devoir*, followed by a series of seven sketches. *Amédée ou Comment s'en débarrasser* directed by Jean-Marie Serreau was staged by Théâtre de Babylone in 1954, also the year of the first publication of *La Cantatrice chauve* and *La Leçon* at Gallimard, followed by *Théâtre I*.

By this time, like Beckett, Ionesco had become an important name of French avant-garde theatre. However, Ionesco was constantly attacked by both Marxist and conservative critics. Roland Barthes, who had returned from Romania where he worked as a librarian at l'Institut Français de Hautes Études in Bucharest between 1947 and 1949⁴⁴, and Bernard Dort set up the polemical journal *Théâtre Populaire* in 1953. According to Yue Zhuo, for Barthes, "the merciless editorial pages and articles he published there were more violent in their denunciation of bourgeois culture than the 'petites mythologies' he was writing at the same time"⁴⁵. Oriented against Aristotelian and avant-garde theatre⁴⁶, the journal had identified the bourgeoisie and the petit bourgeoisie as an enemy, and reproached to

⁴³ See André Le Gall, *Eugène Ionesco*, passim. *L'Anglais sans professeur* alludes to Ionesco's unsuccessful attempt to learn English without a teacher, with the help of the Assimil-method book of exercises *L'Anglais sans peine*.

⁴⁴ For Barthes's sojourn in Romania, see Tiphaine Samoyault, *Roland Barthes*, Paris, Seuil, 2015, pp. 218-229; Alexandru Matei, "Barthes en Roumanie: Histoire et Amour, expériences pathétiques", *Romance Studies*, 34, 2016, 3-4, pp. 185-198, and Alexandru Matei, "Lire Barthes en Roumanie socialiste: les enjeux du pouvoir et leur neutralisation", *Littérature*, 2017, 186, pp. 66-81.

⁴⁵ Yue Zhuo, "The 'Political' Barthes: From Theater to Idiorrhymy", *French Forum*, 1, 2011, 36, p. 60.

⁴⁶ See Andy Stafford, *Roland Barthes*, London, Reaktion Books, 2015, p. 55; Antoine Compagnon, *Les antimodernes, de Joseph de Maistre à Roland Barthes*, Paris, Gallimard, 2005, p. 420.

Beckett, Ionesco, Genet and Adamov that their plays were not educative. Instead, they promoted Bertolt Brecht who had made his name in France once the touring company Berliner Ensemble staged *Mother Courage and Her Children* in 1954. Barthes lionized Brecht as the creator of “major theatre”⁴⁷, which became revolutionary, since its aim was to “intervene in history”⁴⁸.

Barthes's articles on Brecht contained several ironic remarks about Ionesco, placed as if in passing. The very fact that Barthes never signed a review on any of Ionesco's plays can be interpreted as a sign that he did not deem them worth writing on. In his subtly ironic review on Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, “Godot adulte”, Barthes commented: “what is remarkable in *Godot*, as in Adamov, as in Ionesco, is precisely that it provides only one language”⁴⁹. However, Barthes's hyperbole may suggest that these playwrights lacked profundity and symbolism.

In 1955, when Ionesco's *Maître* was published and *Jacques ou la Soumission* and *Tableau* were staged at la Huchette, *Théâtre Populaire* dedicated volume 11 entirely to Brecht; disagreeing with the controversial formula “Art can and must intervene in history” that this volume launched, Ionesco accused Barthes and Dort of “new leftist conformism”⁵⁰.

All these events are recalled in “My Critics and I”, where Ionesco ironically summarized his career as follows: *The Bald Soprano*, conceived as “the Tragedy of Language”, was welcomed with “a great deal of laughter”, which made the playwright “utterly amazed”; *La Leçon* where “one could see how a horrible, sadistic professor went about killing all his unfortunate pupils one by one”, was still welcomed by the public as “highly amusing”⁵¹. Finally, even when Ionesco transformed his “doubts”, “deepest despairs” and “inner conflicts” into dialogue in *Victims of Duty*, he was accused “of being a humbug, a practical joker” and then labelled as a writer of the avant-garde⁵². In these critical comments, Ionesco unfolds irony as a vent for frustration through self-referentiality, which is a characteristic of the ironic discourse itself. Practising “critical, deprecating observations of a self-referential nature” is a “constantly recurring technique” of

⁴⁷ See Roland Barthes, “Théâtre capital”, *France Observateur*, Juillet 1954, in *Œuvres complètes*, tome 1: *Livres, Textes, Entretiens: 1942–1961*. Nouvelle édition revue, corrigée et présentée par Éric Marty, Paris, Seuil, 2002, pp. 503-505.

⁴⁸ Roland Barthes, “The Brechtian Revolution” (1955), in *Critical Essays*. Translated by Richard Howard, Evanston, IL, Northwestern University Press, 1972 [1964], p. 38.

⁴⁹ Roland Barthes, “Godot adulte”, *France Observateur*, Juillet 1954, in *Œuvres complètes*, tome 1, p. 499.

⁵⁰ See Bernard Dort, *L'Écrivain périodique*, Paris, POL, 2001, p. 265.

⁵¹ Eugène Ionesco, “My Critics and I”, *Arts*, 22-28 February, 1956, in *Notes and Counter Notes*, p. 83.

⁵² *Ibidem*, p. 84.

the ironic discourse⁵³. To this, Ionesco adds blame-by-praise: “[...] I wanted to make quite sure whether I should persevere or not; and if so, in what direction. Whom should I consult? My critics, obviously. They were the only people who could enlighten *me*. So I reread and studied with the greatest attention and the greatest respect what these critics had been kind enough to write about my plays”⁵⁴.

In this fragment, starting from hyperbole (characterized as “kind”, critics are supposed to “enlighten” him; they deserve Ionesco’s “greatest attention” and “respect”), he actually criticizes some unethical practices: following critics’ instructions, thus, benefitting from positive reviews. Ionesco dismissed such practices, as we can infer from one of his interviews, where he confessed that “a certain Monsieur Panigel” who used “a good deal of arrogance superciliousness” had called him to give him some ideas for his writing⁵⁵.

Pretending to not have understood the rules of the game (pretence irony)⁵⁶, Ionesco then juxtaposes his qualities versus flaws in a never-ending list, meant precisely to play on ironizing the unrelenting treatment he received from his critics. However, in order to understand the ironic innuendo of these incongruous remarks, the reader must be familiar with the critical debates around avant-garde theatre from France. For the savoury of Ionesco’s style, I will quote one fragment at full length:

And so I learned that I had talent: this time, next time, some time, never; that I had humour; that I was completely humourless; that I was a master of the strange and had the temperament of a mystic; that my plays had metaphysical implications: that – according to another – I was basically a realistic spirit, a psychologist, a good observer of the human heart, and that it was in this direction that I should lead my creative work; that I was rather vague; that I wrote clearly and precisely; that my gift of language *was* poor; that it was rich; that I was a violent critic of contemporary society: that the mysterious flaw in my drama consisted of my failure to denounce an unjust order of society, the established disorder; I was firmly blamed for being asocial; I learned too that I *was* in no way poetic and that I ought to be, for “there is no theatre without poetry”; that I *was* poetic, and that this was just what I should not be, for “what after all does poetry mean?”; that my drama was too self-conscious, too cold and cerebral; or on the contrary primitive, simple, elementary; that I was entirely lacking in imagination, dry and synoptic; that I had no idea how to organize my

⁵³ See Ernst Behler, *Irony and the Discourse of Modernity*, Seattle and London, University of Washington Press, 1990 [1928], p. 112.

⁵⁴ Eugène Ionesco, “My Critics and I”, in *Notes and Counter Notes*, p. 84.

⁵⁵ Eugène Ionesco and Gabriel Jacobs, “Ionesco and the Critics: Eugène Ionesco Interviewed by Gabriel Jacobs”, *Critical Inquiry*, 1, March 1975, 3, p. 646.

⁵⁶ See H.H. Clark and R. Gerrig, “On the Pretense Theory of Irony”, *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, 113, 1984, 1, pp. 113-126.

excessive and undisciplined imagination and that – instead of being dry and economical as I should be – I was verbose⁵⁷.

Humour, realism and good psychology, clearness, the gift of language, poetry are elements that a good playwright's CV should contain; however, Ionesco implies that he was both praised for and denied in turn all these qualities, catching his critics *in flagrante delicto* and suggesting that they relativized these attributes to the point of creating an endless contradiction. In this way, his thoughts about the lack of objective standards of judgment of Romanian critics from *Nu* are revived in a French context. The irony is that this time it is Ionesco himself who is criticized rather than the critic who had written both a positive and a negative review of *Maitreyi* to prove his point that criticism was futile.

The climax of these antithetical remarks is about props, which, otherwise were previously used by Brecht and praised by his critics. Ionesco executes a real *coup de théâtre* and opens in front of the readers' eyes a sort of Russian Matryoshka doll from which we extract critics' quotations containing contradictory remarks. By the end, words are reduced to mere interjections, affirmations and negations:

this was an interesting point in my favor, I would be one of the creators of the drama of objects: "there should be no props in the theatre," preached another, "they are no good, what counts in the text"; why yes, props, yes, they are very important, they make the theme of the play more visual, more theatrical; oh no they don't; oh yes they do: oh no...⁵⁸

After this maelstrom, the denouement is equally powerful, since Ionesco plays the self-ironic card in a diary style which originates from *Nu*; he apparently blames himself rather than his critics and offers himself one more chance to properly understand their wisdom:

I clasped my head in my hands. I told myself it was better to listen to one critic only. Choosing one at random, I read each of his reviews as they appeared: he blamed my drama for being too facile, for having no secrets; two months later, the same critic objected to an overloading of heavy and obscure symbols and defied anyone to understand what I was about⁵⁹.

All such irreconcilable differences were to become the plot of the play *Improvisation or the Shepherd's Chameleon*⁶⁰, expressing "the necessity to free theatre outside all external determinations"⁶¹. The play's title alludes to Molière's *L'Impromptu de Versailles* and Giraudoux's *L'Impromptu de Paris*. Ionesco

⁵⁷ Eugène Ionesco, "My Critics and I", in *Notes and Counter Notes*, p. 85.

⁵⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 84-85.

⁵⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 85.

⁶⁰ *Improvisation* was staged by Maurice Jacquemont at Studio des Champs Élysées in 1956.

⁶¹ Jean-François Morissette, "Ionesco et la tragédie du langage", *Jeu. Revue de théâtre, Échos des années 50*, 107, 2003, 2, p. 156.

characterized it as “a rather wicked joke”, a “*montage* of quotations and complications” drawn from the “erudite studies” of three critics: two of them – Marxist critics, Barthes (featuring as Bartholomeus I) and Dort (Bartholomeus II), and Jean-Jacques Gautier (Bartholomeus III), who signed critical articles against Ionesco in the conservative daily *Le Figaro*⁶².

Esslin emphasized Molière’s touch (reminiscent of *Malade Imaginaire*), concluding that Ionesco used the 17th-century playwright’s trick of putting himself on stage in the act of writing a play, while being visited by three scholars “dressed in the gowns of the pompous doctors” of Molière’s play, “purveyors of a half-existentialist half-Brechtian farrago of dramatic theory, with allusions to Adamov, who discovered the Aristotelian principles before Aristotle, Sartre, and, of course, above all, Ionesco’s special *bête noire*, Brecht”⁶³.

Asked to read his play, he explains that this is not yet ready but it develops around a “touching scene” of a shepherd embracing a chameleon: “You can say I *am* the shepherd if you like, and the theatre is the chameleon. Because I’ve embraced a theatrical career, and the theatre, of course, *changes*, for the theatre is life”⁶⁴. However, creation is less important to the three “philosophisters”, philosophers who like to practise “pure philosophistry”⁶⁵. Ionesco uses marks of irony invoked by Booth: asteismus, often punning his teachers’ retorts (“BART I: All about costumology? / IONESCO: All about costu...what?”⁶⁶), micticismus (“IONESCO [*aside*]: What else do they want them to do? Hiccup, belch, click their tongues, whoop like Red Indians or break their wind?”)⁶⁷ as well as condensation, a typical device of the incongruity theory of humour, making up a new word that condenses philosophers and sophists to designate those who came to teach him theatricality”, “costumology”, “historicization, and decorology”, “audienco-psychology” or “audienco-psycho-sociology”⁶⁸. As I showed in “Anathematizing Barthes and Admiring Beckett with Eugène Ionesco”, these terms are direct allusions to terminology Barthes used in his articles in the 1950s: the remarks about costumology (“Your costume is very ill... It’s got to be cured”⁶⁹; “Your costume is suffering from faulty nutrition...”)⁷⁰ allude to Barthes’s “The Diseases

⁶² Eugène Ionesco, “My Critics and I”, in *Notes and Counter Notes*, p. 128.

⁶³ Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, p. 115.

⁶⁴ Eugène Ionesco, *Improvisation or the Shepherd’s Chameleon*, in *The Killer and Other Plays*. Translated by Donald Watson, New York, Grove Press, 1960, pp. 113-114, original emphasis.

⁶⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 117.

⁶⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 132.

⁶⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 126.

⁶⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 132-133, 147.

⁶⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 140.

⁷⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 141.

of Costume” (1955)⁷¹, the “consciousness of unconsciousness” of the audience to Barthes’s *Mother Courage Blind* (1955)⁷².

Ionesco plays on irony, suggesting that in spite of mastering dialectics and having long speeches about “the Being of not-Being and the Not-Being-of-Being in the Know”⁷³, in other words, engaging in an interminable “blathering about nothing in particular”⁷⁴, to allude to Beckett’s characters Vladimir and Estragon, the three dogmatists are actually ignorant of basic knowledge of theatre history and theory and, for example, fail even to recognize the origin of the most important playwright of Great Britain, William Shakespeare, who is in turn Russian, then, Polish, according to Bartholomeus III’s *Larousse*⁷⁵, or confuse Aristotle with Adamov and attribute Aristotle’s definitions of tragedy from *Poetics* to the latter⁷⁶. The appearance of Adamov in the play is not at all coincidental. In his long interview with Gabriel Jacobs, Ionesco invoked a positive review by Dort on both Adamov and himself which saw their criticism as “valid, but negative”, suggesting that they “should work positively, that is to say, produce works committed to Communist party”, a suggestion Ionesco ignored but Adamov took on.⁷⁷

Ionesco ridicules the three characters, who not only congratulate one another on their wise solipsism but at times contradict one another gently in a permanent dialectics. His irony reminds us of his *Nu*, where he accused Romanian critics of “absence of lucidity”, “juvenile enthusiasm”, “a long tradition of blunders”⁷⁸ as well as the fragment on his critics arguing on theatre with or without poetry⁷⁹ that was previously analysed at length in this article:

IONESCO: I found that Shakespeare is... poetic!
 BART I: [*perplexed*] Poetic?
 BART II: Poetic, poetic?
 IONESCO: [*timidly*] Poetic.
 BART III: Poetic, poetic, poetic?
 IONESCO: Yes, by that I mean that there’s poetry in it...
 BART III: Jargon! Another piece of jargon.
 BART I: But what *is* this poetry?

⁷¹ Barthes, “The Disease of the Costume” (1955), in *Critical Essays*, p. 41.

⁷² Arleen Ionescu, “Anathematizing Barthes and Admiring Beckett with Eugène Ionesco”, *Paragraph*, 45, 2022, 2, pp. 187–202.

⁷³ Eugène Ionesco, *Improvisation*, p. 118.

⁷⁴ Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, in *The Complete Dramatic Works*, London, Faber and Faber, 2006, p. 61.

⁷⁵ Eugène Ionesco, *Improvisation*, pp. 120–122.

⁷⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 124.

⁷⁷ Eugène Ionesco and Gabriel Jacobs, “Ionesco and the Critics”, p. 646.

⁷⁸ Eugène Ionesco, *Non*, pp. 72–73, Teodorescu’s translation, p. 274.

⁷⁹ Eugène Ionesco, *Notes and Counter Notes*, p. 85.

BART III: [to BART I and BART II] Good Lord... poetry!... [*Pursing his lips in scorn.*]

BART II: [to BART III] Be quiet! No poetry, please [To Bart I:] Poetry's an enemy of our science!

BART I: [to Ionesco] You're steeped in false knowledge.

BART III: He only likes wild and extravagant nonsense.

BART I: [to BART II and BART III, *indicating Ionesco*] His mind hasn't been properly trained...

BART II: It's been warped.

BART III: We must straighten it out.

BART II: If we can. [To BART III:] But not, my dear Bartholomeus, in the direction you want it to take. We disagree on several points, as you very well know⁸⁰.

According to G. G. Sedgewick, in drama, irony has a special status, which differentiates it from general irony that "is the property peculiar and essential to the illusion of the theatre"; it becomes "dramatic drama", "the sense of contradiction felt by spectators of a drama who see a character acting in ignorance of his condition"⁸¹. This is the case of the three Bartholomeus: I (Barthes), the main voice, II (Dort), who repeats his term twice, and III (Gautier), who echoes the same term three times. Barthes and Dort signed in leftist journals, while Gautier was writing for the right-wing newspaper *Le Figaro*. After Gautier had attacked Ionesco and Brecht in a review in *Le Figaro* (July 1954), Barthes commented ironically that Gautier lacked talent. "We disagree on several points" is actually a warning to Gautier, with whom Barthes and Dort agreed on criticizing avant-garde theatre but disagreed on Brecht⁸², hence the "short, inaudible confabulation between the three"⁸³ that Ionesco does not forget to include in the stage directions. The three Bartholomeus reduce all theatre to Brecht's epic drama, a reason why, after Shakespeare was dismissed, it is Molière's turn, since he did not express the "social gestus of his age"⁸⁴. Although they seem to take hold of the playwright's mind who becomes a sort of monkey trained to recite what he was told, they do not seem to impress the common-sensical cleaning woman who once has finally been allowed to enter her master's studio, manages to push them away and also clean Ionesco's mind.

The London Controversy

⁸⁰ Eugène Ionesco, *Improvisation*, p. 122, original italics.

⁸¹ G.G. Sedgewick, *Of Irony: Especially in Drama*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2018 [1960], p. 49.

⁸² See Barthes's comments on Gautier in "Comment s'en passer", *France Observateur*, Octobre 1954, in *Œuvres complètes*, tome 1, pp. 517-519.

⁸³ *Ibidem*.

⁸⁴ Eugène Ionesco, *Improvisation*, p. 121.

After the first American production of *Waiting for Godot* in Miami and its first in London (1956), in 1958 Ionesco published two volumes of theatre at London and two volumes at New York. The debates on avant-garde theatre moved into the British cultural space under the name of The London Controversy. The influential critic Kenneth Tynan had written a review of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, where he had equated the play to "a dramatic vacuum" with "no plot, no climax, no *dénouement*; no beginning, no middle, and no end", a play that "frankly jettisons everything by which we recognise theatre" and "arrives at the custom-house, as it were, with no luggage, no passport, and nothing to declare; yet it gets through, as might a pilgrim from Mars"⁸⁵. Tynan had admitted that Beckett forced critics to "re-examine the rules which have hitherto governed the drama"⁸⁶. The abrupt shift from being Ionesco's admirer to one of his fiercest critics originates from Tynan's change of preferences from avant-garde theatre to Brecht who had become a point of reference in his subsequent criticism⁸⁷. Thus, after the revival performance of *The Chairs* and *The Lesson* at the Royal Court (1958), Tynan wrote the polemical article "Ionesco: Man of Destiny?" in *The Observer*, where, in a parody of contrasts, he seemed to contradict everything he had previously found valuable in Beckett and Ionesco. The article started on high tones, considering their spectators "ostriches" who ruled Brecht "out of court" because "he was too real":

[...] they preferred Beckett's *Endgame*, in which the human element was minimal, to *Waiting for Godot*, which not only contained two tramps of mephitic reality but even seemed to regard them, as human beings, with love. [...] But it was only when M. Ionesco arrived, that they hailed a messiah. Here at last was a self-proclaimed advocate of *anti-theatre*: explicitly anti-realist, and by implication anti-reality as well⁸⁸.

He continued his tirade against Ionesco's plays in a style that bears a strange resemblance to Barthes's final evaluation of avant-garde theatre, and that proves that Barthes's ideas had crossed the border to London: "Here at last was a writer ready to declare that words were meaningless and that all communication between human beings was impossible"⁸⁹. Barthes had previously mentioned that the inability of Ionesco's mute character from *The Chairs* to speak was the proof of an

⁸⁵ Kenneth Tynan, in *The Observer*, 7 August, 1955, p. 11, quoted in L. Graver and R. Federman, *Samuel Beckett: The Critical Heritage*, London and New York, Routledge, 2005, p. 104.

⁸⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 106.

⁸⁷ See Kenneth Tynan, "Braw and Brecht", *The Observer*, 2 September, 1956, p. 10.

⁸⁸ Kenneth Tynan, "Ionesco, Man of Destiny?", *The Observer*, June 22, 1958, in Eugène Ionesco, *Notes and Counter Notes*, p. 88.

⁸⁹ *Ibidem*.

“essentially precarious”, “faked” a theatrical act that “becomes true when it shuts up”⁹⁰.

Resorting to raw sarcasm, Tynan accused Ionesco of having created “a world of isolated robots, conversing in cartoon-strip balloons of dialogue that are sometimes hilarious, sometimes evocative, and quite often neither, on which occasion, they become profoundly tiresome”⁹¹. On the joke level, Tynan claims to define Ionesco’s work, yet rather expresses direct contempt:

A blind alley, perhaps, adorned with *tachiste* murals. Or a self-imposed vacuum, wherein the author ominously bids us observe the absence of air. Or, best of all, a funfair ride on a ghost train, all skulls and hooting waxworks, from which we emerge into the far more intimidating clamor of diurnal reality⁹².

Taking irony and humour as a “source of consolation and of defence against the unknown and the inexplicable”⁹³, Tynan evaluates Ionesco’s theatre as “pungent and exciting”, but changes his mind, asserting that it is actually “a diversion”⁹⁴.

The next part is an in-depth analysis of the *tour-de-force* Ionesco’s reply which is as theatrical as *Nu* and *Improvisation*. As Viviane Araújo Alves da Costa Pereira rightly observed, the London Controversy progressed like a play, with stage directions that “take the form of a text printed in a special font, and do more than just introducing the subject of the text that follows it. Full of irony, stage directions give the reader [...] the context in which the controversy occurred, from an obviously biased point of view”⁹⁵.

Indeed, Tynan is introduced in a note as “one of the critics who fought most of battles that made Ionesco well known in England. When the battle was won, he, then, doubted himself and decided to talk about it in *The Observer*, giving an interrogative title to his article”⁹⁶. In this way, “Tynan’s weakness of judgment is made clear: not only has he changed his opinion about Ionesco but also he has doubts and talks about them using an *interrogative* title”⁹⁷. Moreover, Ionesco offers an apparently “gratuitous information”, “the title of the book in which one of Tynan’s articles was published in France, something like *Les jeunes gens en*

⁹⁰ Roland Barthes, “Le théâtre français d’avant-garde”, *Le français dans le monde*, Juin-Juillet 1961, in *Œuvres complètes*, tome 1, pp. 1097-1098.

⁹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 89.

⁹² *Ibidem*, p. 89.

⁹³ Keith Cameron, “Humour and History”, in Keith Cameron Oxford (ed.), *Humour and History*, Oxford, Intellect Books, 1993, p. 5.

⁹⁴ Kenneth Tynan, “Ionesco, Man of Destiny?”, p. 89.

⁹⁵ Viviane Araújo Alves da Costa Pereira, “Stage Directions Beyond Theater: Eugène Ionesco’s Exercise in Theatricality”, *Revista Brasileira Estudos da Presença*, 6, 2016, 2, p. 339, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/2237-266052382>. Accessed February 13, 2022.

⁹⁶ Eugène Ionesco, “The London Controversy”, in *Notes and Counter Notes*, p. 87.

⁹⁷ Viviane Araújo Alves da Costa Pereira, “Stage Directions Beyond Theater”, p. 339.

colère vous parlent", which makes Tynan's article lose "its authority from the start"⁹⁸. After setting the scene, Ionesco starts from a deferring attitude to the critic about whom he uses only positive words:

I was of course honoured by the article Mr Tynan devoted to my two plays [...] in spite of the strictures it contained, which a critic has a perfect right to make. However, since some of his objections seem to me to be based on premises that are not only false but, strictly speaking outside the domain of the theatre, I think I have the right to make certain comments⁹⁹.

In his reply, Ionesco assumed both the identity of Tynan's reverential reader and that of his critic, skilfully playing one against the other, yet remaining "above" what he asserts¹⁰⁰. Declaring his dislike of messiahs, Ionesco confessed that an artist or a playwright should never consider such a direction, debunking ironically every single commentary from the most audacious one, which he dismissed from the beginning, claiming that it is rather his opponent "who is in search of messiahs"¹⁰¹. Then he proceeded methodically, from the general misunderstanding of the playwright's role ("[a] playwright simply writes plays, in which he can offer only a testimony, not a didactic message") and of art's meaning ("[a] work of art has nothing to do with doctrine") to the allegations about his anti-realism, never forgetting to add the verb "to seem", in a self-deprecating game of verbal irony, as if blaming himself for the misunderstanding of Tynan's words:

Mr. Tynan seems to accuse me of being deliberately, explicitly anti-realist; of having declared that words have no meaning and that all language is incommunicable. That is only partly true, for the very fact of writing and presenting plays is surely incompatible with such a view. [...] As for the idea of reality, Mr. Tynan seems [...] to acknowledge only one place of reality: what is called the "social" plane, which seems to me to be the most external, in other words the most superficial¹⁰².

In his reply, Tynan further accused Ionesco of being stuck in "the groove of cubism" and "in danger of forgetting: of locking himself up in that ball of mirrors which in philosophy is known a solipsism"¹⁰³. Ionesco's response letter to *The Observer* which remained unpublished appeared in a special issue of *Cahiers des Saisons* where he responded to his "courteous enemy", nevertheless considering that to have his letter published in *The Observer* would be an abuse of hospitality

⁹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 339.

⁹⁹ Eugène Ionesco, "The Playwright's Role", *The Observer*, June 29, 1958, in Ionesco, *Notes and Counter Notes*, p. 90

¹⁰⁰ See Claire Colebrook, *Irony*, p. 19.

¹⁰¹ Eugène Ionesco, "The Playwright's Role", *The Observer*, June 29, 1958, in Ionesco, *Notes and Counter Notes*, p. 90.

¹⁰² *Ibidem*, pp. 90-91.

¹⁰³ Kenneth Tynan, "Ionesco and the Phantom", *The Observer*, 6 July 1958, in Eugène Ionesco, *Notes and Counter Notes*, p. 95.

as well as “a waste of time, for we would only succeed in repeating ourselves”¹⁰⁴. Yet, who did Ionesco ironically designate by “we”, since he did not appear in the pages of the newspaper anymore? His critics, obviously. Making more or less the same tactfully ironical remarks, he stated simply that the playwright’s mission is to “offer only testimony, not a didactic message”¹⁰⁵. Finally invoking an episode from his military training in Romania, when his superior despised him because his boots were not well polished, he asked rhetorically: “How could I make him understand that there are other standards of judgment, apart from polishing boots? And that shining my boots did not entirely exhaust my possibilities *as a human being*?”¹⁰⁶ The superiority in the social order, Ionesco thought, could be surpassed only at his sergeant’s home where he could have shared the same fears of death as Ionesco: “It is in our solitude that we can all *be* reunited. And that is why true society transcends our social machinery”¹⁰⁷.

Concluding Remarks

This article proposed a thorough investigation of Ionesco’s irony, starting with his Romanian debut, *Nu*, a book of literary criticism in which he offended all his compatriots, and continuing with his dramatic career and his responses to his critics from France and England. I analysed Ionesco’s responses to Roland Barthes and Bernard Dort, the admirers of Brecht, who were running the polemical journal *Théâtre Populaire*, to Jean-Jacques Gautier, who signed critical articles against Ionesco in *Le Figaro*, and to Kenneth Tynan who shifted from Ionesco’s admirer after his debut in London to one of his fiercest critics with whom he had highly ironical exchanges in *The Observer*. Ionesco’s verbal irony from *Nu* was later on transformed into dramatic irony and sarcasm in a play like *Improvisation or the Shepherd’s Chameleon*, where Ionesco attempted to free theatre of all external theories that he considered fake. Juxtaposing incongruous remarks of his critics from Paris and London, Ionesco performed irony at its best, in a Romanian-recognisable style that was perhaps hard to digest by his critics, yet a mark of the playwright’s wisdom and indubitable literary talent.

¹⁰⁴ Eugène Ionesco, “Hearts Are Not Worn on the Sleeve”, published as “Le Cœur n’est pas sur la Main”, in *Cahiers des Saisons*, 15, 1959, Hiver, in *Notes and Counter Notes*, p. 101.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 102.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 107.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 108.

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PERFORMING IRONY: EUGÈNE IONESCO'S BATTLES WITH HIS CRITICS (Abstract)

My article endeavours to investigate playwright Eugène Ionesco's irony, following two critical debates: the first was mainly conducted by Roland Barthes and Bernard Dort, in the pages of the polemical journal *Théâtre Populaire*, which found Ionesco's ironic response not only in numerous interviews and theoretical texts, but also in the play *Improvisation or The Shepherd's Chameleon*, where Barthes and Dort feature as characters. The second, known as the London Controversy, consisted of a series of articles written by Kenneth Tynan and Ionesco in *The Observer* and *Cahiers des Saisons*. The rationale behind these two analyses is to prove that, like his compatriot Emil Cioran's *Pe culmile disperării* [*On the Heights of Despair*], which was the stylistic matrix of his French texts, Ionesco's first book, *Nu* [*No*] can be traced back as the origin of Ionesco's irony. Ionesco's irony has an Eastern European descent, and perhaps this is why Barthes, Dort and Tynan could not relate properly to Ionesco's playful remarks.

Keywords: Eugène Ionesco, Roland Barthes, Bernard Dort, Kenneth Tynan, the critical debates from *Théâtre Populaire* (1953–1964).

ÎNSCENAREA IRONIEI. CONFRUNTAREA DINTRE EUGÈNE IONESCO ȘI CRITICII SĂI (Rezumat)

Articolul meu încearcă să analizeze ironia dramaturgului Eugène Ionesco, urmărind două dezbateri critice: prima s-a desfășurat în principal în articolele sub semnătura lui Roland Barthes și a lui Bernard Dort în paginile revistei polemice *Théâtre Populaire*, care și-au găsit răspunsul ironic din partea lui Ionesco în numeroase interviuri și texte teoretice, dar și în piesa de teatru *Improvizatie sau Cameleonul păstorului*, în care Barthes and Dort sunt *dramatis personae*; cea de-a doua, cunoscută sub denumirea de „Controversa din Londra”, a constat într-o serie de articole publicate de Kenneth Tynan și Ionesco în *The Observer* și *Cahiers des Saisons*. Motivația principală a celor două analize este de a demonstra faptul că, similar volumului *Pe culmile disperării* al lui Emil Cioran, care a reprezentat o matrice stilistică a textelor sale franceze, prima carte a lui Ionesco, *Nu*, poate fi considerată drept originea ironiei lui Ionesco. Ironia lui Ionesco este de sorginte est-europeană și probabil de aceea Barthes, Dort și Tynan au avut dificultăți de a răspunde remarcilor jucăușe ale lui Ionesco.

Cuvinte-cheie: Eugène Ionesco, Roland Barthes, Bernard Dort, Kenneth Tynan, dezbateri critice din revista *Théâtre Populaire* (1953–1964).

THE IRONY OF ION NEGOIȚESCU

For the reader familiar with I. Negoîtescu's critical studies, autobiographical pages, journalism or epistolary activity, it becomes obvious that irony is a fundamental part of his critical and ideological arsenal. Without claiming exhaustiveness, the purpose of the article is to analyse the roles of the Transylvanian critic's irony, to expose the types of literature that he ironized and the writers who fell prey to that treatment. In other words, what are the weapons and rhetoric of the ironic dimension of I. Negoîtescu's writing? At the same time, the study aims to follow the consequences of irony in the work (and life) of Negoîtescu, a critic who contributed significantly to the overall image of Romanian literature, despite various biographical impediments and a troublesome publishing history.

Irony as Attitude

Both in his youth, as an influential member of the Sibiu Literary Circle, and in the literary activity after the grace period of the same literary group, Negoîtescu is marked by a strong personality which manifests itself in the severity of his critical judgements. Of course, the incisiveness of his literary criticism only obtains the "silver medal" from the members of the Literary Circle because, according to Ov. S. Crohmălniceanu, Cornel Regman remains the group's harshest critic: "In his book reviews, I. Negoîtescu rarely resorted to rejection, leaving this task to his colleague and friend Cornel Regman. He prefers to write almost exclusively about what attracts him; he's always in search of talents"¹.

In the evolution of Negoîtescu's writing, the use of irony is a decisive indicator of the maturation of his style. And the period in which this maturation is most visible coincides with his time in the Literary Circle. In the years spent in Sibiu, the writing of the critic in this formative period marks the transition from eulogy to irony. This new dimension has its origins in the active participation in a literary collective where Negoîtescu stands out and in the middle of which the young critic feels in his own element. Too little of his early journalism ("we refer

¹ Ovid S. Crohmălniceanu, Klaus Heitmann, *Cercul literar de la Sibiu și influența catalitică a culturii germane* [*The Sibiu Literary Circle and the Catalyst Influence of German Culture*], București, Universalia, 2000, p. 286: "În critica de «întâmpinare», I. Negoîtescu recurge foarte rar la respingere, lasă sarcina asta colegului și prietenului său Cornel Regman. Preferă să scrie aproape exclusiv numai despre ce-l atrage; e în căutare de talente". Unless otherwise stated, the quotations are translated into English by the author of this paper.

to conjunctural articles related to ‘youthful zeal’ or to a transient questionable political orientation”² as the wanderings into the far-right legionary movement³ are categorized by the author in the years of maturity) heralds such a mutation. However, Negoîtescu’s “juvenile” articles did not show a deficit of culture, nor of polemical spirit. It is only after joining a literary group that incisive criticism can be brought into discussion when referring to the critic of the Literary Circle. Already endowed with analytical seriousness in addition to a natural sense for aesthetic value (used mostly for positive reviews, until joining the literary group) Negoîtescu develops an ironic, and therefore essentially critical, direction.

Irony is among the assumed, emblematic dimensions of the Sibiu group. And Negoîtescu is *par excellence* the embodiment of this trait of the Literary Circle’s spirit, both in the programmatic articles written on behalf of the group and in the publications that bear his own signature. In other words, the irony of the Literary Circle of Sibiu bears the stamp of I. Negoîtescu. However, the favourable climate for the evolution of this spirit is maintained, first of all, by the exemplary literary friendship with Radu Stanca. “The king of a rainy country”⁴, another figure of authority in the Literary Circle, is responsible for many of the innovative ideas of the group, although he is not always credited as such⁵. As for the atmosphere of the Literary Circle, reconstructed from exegesis and memoirs, I. Negoîtescu together with Radu Stanca impose a certain tone finding its proper resonance in the company of colleagues such as Cornel Regman, I.D. Sîrbu, Ştefan Aug. Doinaş etc. The same group of literary friends plays an important role in redressing the author’s far-right missteps. The passages from *Straja dragonilor* [*The Watch of the Dragons*] that evoke the ironies to which the young I. Negoîtescu was subjected by Radu Stanca and I.D. Sîrbu are memorable and bear witness to the quality of his friends:

During the rebellion, I did my “duty”. I was placed on the roof of the prefecture, next to a machine gun that intimidated me because I had no idea how to handle it and no one was kind enough to explain. I didn’t feel comfortable there at all, but I couldn’t

² I. Negoîtescu, *De la “elanul juvenil” la “visatul Euphorion” (Publicistica de tinerețe: 1938–1947)* [From “Youthful Zeal” to “Dreamed Euphorion” (Youth Publishing: 1938–1947)]. Edited by Lelia Nicolescu, Cluj-Napoca, Casa Cărții de Știință, 2007, p. 9: “ne referim la articole conjuncturale, ce țin de ‘elanul juvenil’ sau de o pasageră orientare politică discutabilă”.

³ The most competent synthesis of I. Negoîtescu’s involvement with the Romanian Legionary Movement can be found in Marta Petreu, *Blaga, între legionari și comuniști* [Blaga, between Legionnaires and Communists], Iași, Polirom, 2021, pp. 251–256.

⁴ Radu Stanca used to introduce himself quoting the famous verse from Baudelaire. See Ion Vartic, “Regele unei țări ploioase” [“The King of a Rainy Country”], *Apostrof*, 2020, 8, <https://www.revista-apostrof.ro/arhiva/an2020/n8/a31/>. Accessed December 26, 2020.

⁵ See Ion Vartic, “Lovitura de stat de la Cercul Literar și urmările sale” [“The *coup d’état* of the Literary Circle and its Aftermath”], *Apostrof*, 2020, 12, <https://www.revista-apostrof.ro/arhiva/an2020/n12/a28/>. Accessed May 30, 2021.

let myself be considered a coward or even a ‘traitor’. Not far from the prefecture lived Radu Stanca - he came from time to time to laugh at me. [...] Only once did I go to a clandestine meeting, after which, always cornered by the relentless ironies of my anti-legionary college colleagues, who started to be my literary friends, Ion D. Sîrbu’s ironies being the most effective, I quickly lost my ‘faith’ and, becoming myself again, wrote *Povestea tristă a lui Ramon Ocg* [*The Sad Story of Ramon Ocg*]⁶.

Collegial irony has the effect of redirecting the young critic to his own political and cultural identity. Thus, in a fairly short time, I. Negoîtescu starts writing the famous “Scrisoare către d. Lovinescu a ‘Cercului Literar de la Sibiu’” [“Letter of the ‘Literary Circle from Sibiu’ to Mr. Lovinescu”], a document also known as the *manifesto* of the same group. Other members of the Literary Circle, such as Radu Stanca, Victor Iancu and Romeo Dăscălescu also contribute to the letter’s final version⁷. The manifesto takes the form of a rally to Eugen Lovinescu’s literary ideology and has often been interpreted, first of all, as an attack on the “fascist-sămănătorist” literature⁸ of the fifth decade of the 20th century.

Although the anti-fascist opposition is a coordinate that the members of the Literary Circle have in common with the poets of *Albatros* literary magazine, the type of irony practised by the two major groups of the Romanian “war generation” differs. Corina Croitoru categorizes the irony of the first group as congruent with the romantic, aesthetic irony of the 19th century, a century that the members of the Sibiu Literary Circle of Sibiu are programmatically recovering, among other things:

Like the poets from *Albatros*, the poets of the Sibiu Literary Circle thus give up the obsolete desideratum of pure lyricism, but not in order to exhibit the ethical value of poetry as the former do, but to enhance its aesthetic value through ethics. Their irony is not ethical either, but aesthetic, descending, as they themselves admit, from German romanticism⁹.

⁶ I. Negoîtescu, *Straja dragonilor* [*The Watch of the Dragons*], Cluj-Napoca, Biblioteca Apostrof, 1994, p. 205: “La rebeliune, mi-am făcut ‘datoria’. Am fost plasat pe acoperişul prefecturii, lângă o mitralieră care mă intimidă fiindcă habar n-aveam cum se mănuieste şi nimeni n-a avut bunăvoinţa să mă lămurească. Nu mă simţeam deloc la larg acolo, însă nu puteam lăsa să fiu considerat laş sau chiar ‘trădător’. Nu prea departe de prefectură locuia Radu Stanca – venea din când în când să rădă de mine. [...] O singură dată m-am dus la o întrunire clandestină, apoi, mereu încolţit de ironiile necruţătoare ale colegilor de facultate anti-legionari, care începeau să-mi devină prieteni literari, ironiile lui Ion D. Sîrbu fiind cele mai eficiente, mi-am pierdut nemaipomenit de repede ‘credinţa’ şi, redevenind eu, am scris *Povestea tristă a lui Ramon Ocg*”.

⁷ Marta Petreu, *Blaga, între legionari şi comunişti*, p. 251.

⁸ A clarification that I. Negoîtescu himself provides in a footnote 23 years after the publication of the Manifesto, in *Curenţi noi în poezia din Ardeal* [*New Currents in Transylvanian Poetry*], volume *Scriitori moderni* [*Modern Writers*], Bucureşti, EPL, 1966, p. 369n.

⁹ Corina Croitoru, *Politica ironiei în poezia românească sub comunism* [*The Politics of Irony in Romanian Poetry under the Communist Regime*], Cluj-Napoca, Casa Cărţii de Ştiinţă, 2014, p. 80:

The anti-fascist programmatic opposition is not enough to qualify the irony of the Literary Circle as ethical (in the sense of commitment in relation to the real): “Through the dialogue they establish with other literary schools and movements whose specific elements the Literary Circle revisits (the figure of the symbolist dandy, for example), their irony enters the domain of literary history, not that of history of events”¹⁰. The specification is valid for the poetry of the Sibiu Literary Circle. But Negoîtescu’s literary career, taken as a whole, does not remain confined to the borders of aesthetic irony. “Note that in the case of I. Negoîtescu, we have an increasingly sharp evolution from the assertion and preservation of ‘aesthetic exclusivism’ to those of political engagement”¹¹. After the geographical dispersion of the group, Negoîtescu’s irony will expand its area (most remarkably so, compared to other core-members of the Sibiu Literary Circle) from the aesthetic to the ethical.

The irony of the Sibiu Literary Circle is defined by the critic in a letter to Radu Stanca dated December 3, 1945:

What makes us (the members of the Circle) resemble the German romantics, more precisely, the group described by Ricarda Huch’s admirable book, is our irony, which is even more emphatic in our case, because irony in our Circle is not only directed towards the world, but to ourselves, terrible and devouring but also delicious. For example, this very caustic Regman who plucks out of you any new feather that wishes to become a wing¹².

Indeed, the group of Sibiu is characterized by unleashing collegial irony and by its use as a technique of intellectual and artistic refinement. If the Literary Circle can be defined as a “distilled” variant of the wider “Octavian Goga” Student Circle, then adoption of irony as an attitude becomes a condition of that “ascension”. Both irony and self-irony are chapters at which Negoîtescu excels.

“Ca și poezii de la *Albatros*, poezii Cercului literar de la Sibiu renunță, astfel, la dezideratul perimat al liricii pure, însă nu pentru a exhiba valoarea etică a poeziei, asemeni celor dintâi, ci pentru a o potența pe cea estetică prin intermediul eticului. Ironia lor nu este nici ea de natură etică, ci estetică, venind, după cum înșiși o recunosc, pe filiera romantismului german”.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*: “Prin dialogul pe care-l stabilește cu alte curente și mișcări ale căror elemente specifice le reia (figura dandy-ului simbolist, spre exemplu), ironia lor intră în jocul istoriei literare, nu în cel al istoriei evenimentiale”.

¹¹ Andrei Bodi, “A gândi altfel, a gândi împotriva” [“To Think Differently, to Think Against”], in Sanda Cordoș (ed.), *Spiritul critic la Cercul literar de la Sibiu* [*The Critical Spirit of the Sibiu Literary Circle*], Cluj-Napoca, Accent, 2009, p. 72: “Să observăm că avem, în cazul lui I. Negoîtescu, o evoluție tot mai tranșantă dinspre afirmarea și conservarea ‘exclusivismului estetic’ spre angajarea politică”.

¹² I. Negoîtescu, Radu Stanca, *Un roman epistolar* [*An Epistolary Novel*], București, Albatros, 1978, p. 14: “Ceea ce ne face asemănători (pe noi din Cerc) romanticilor germani, adică mai precis grupului surprins de cartea admirabilă a Ricardei Huch, e ironia noastră dar și mai accentuată, căci la noi nu e numai ironia față de lume, ci ironia față de noi înșine, teribilă, devoratoare dar și delicioasă. De pildă acest Regman atât de dizolvant, care îți rupe orice fulg nou care vrea să se facă aripă”.

The irony as a group attitude of the Sibiu Literary Circle, as an instance of critical spirit, resorts to the instrumentalization of the principles of politeness so that conflicts among the members of the group can be avoided. In the words of Katharina Barbe, who theorizes the relationship between politeness and irony:

With this use of irony, speakers can then be aggressive in unaggressive ways. When speakers attack directly, they in turn can be attacked, which leads to conflict. When employing irony, however, speakers are not as obviously aggressive and can thwart counter-attacks. Irony, therefore, turns conflict aside. A critical statement, once clothed in an inoffensive way, helps speakers and hearers to save face¹³.

As expected, such a group atmosphere has positive consequences on the quality of the literary production of the Literary Circle. However, that does not mean that the irony of the cenacle is accepted by all members of the group. Especially the newer members need a certain adjustment process. For example, a young Nicolae Balotă is deeply irritated by the above-mentioned atmosphere at an early stage:

I think that even during the Sibiu meetings of the Literary Circle, as the youngest, the latest to arrive, I kept a somewhat eccentric position in relation the Circle. Of course, I was too independent and too proud to stand the “discipline” (in the oldest, most violent sense of the word) that the veterans in the Circle imposed on newcomers. A certain mocking, “superior” tone from Stanca, Nego’s ironies (that “Salutations, embodied humanism!” – with which he greeted me), Regman’s merciless humour, not to mention Gary’s crass gossip or mockery, they all affected me at first. But I couldn’t stand them for long¹⁴.

According to his own confession, a different hierarchy of values contributed to Nicolae Balotă’s ambiguous position in the ranks of the Sibiu circle meetings that were predominantly literary. That is because the author of *Caietul albastru* [*The Blue Notebook*], although in accordance with the set of values of the Literary Circle, “cultivated in secret” a different priority, difficult to confess, in which literary appetites can easily be sacrificed on the altar of philosophical or mystical

¹³ Katharina Barbe, *Irony in Context*, Amsterdam/Philadelphia, John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1995, pp. 89-90.

¹⁴ Nicolae Balotă, *Caietul albastru: timp mort 1954–1955, remember 1991–1998* [*The Blue Notebook: Dead Time 1954–1955, Remember 1991–1998*], vol. I., București, Ideea Europeană, 2007, p. 272: “Cred că încă pe timpul ceneclurilor sibiene ale Cercului Literar, fiind cel mai tânăr, ultimul venit, mi-am păstrat o poziție oarecum excentrică față de Cerc. Desigur, eram prea independent și prea orgolios pentru ca să suport ‘disciplina’ (în sensul cel mai vechi, violent al termenului) pe care cei mai vechi din Cerc o impuneau noilor veniți. Un anumit ton zeflemisitor, ‘de sus’, al lui Stanca, ironiile lui Nego (acel, ‘Salut, umanismul incarnat!’ – cu care mă întâmpina), umorul necruțător al lui Regman, ca să nu mai vorbesc de bârfa sau de batjocura grasă a lui Gary, toate acestea m-au atins și pe mine la început. Dar nu le-am suportat multă vreme”.

reflection¹⁵. However, the above excerpt was meant to illustrate a literary group atmosphere in which irony enjoyed pride of place. Another similar sample, also with I. Negoîtescu as a protagonist, can be found among the documents edited by Dan Damaschin, *Tabloul de adevăruri privitor la un număr determinat de contemporani* [*The Picture of Truths Concerning a Certain Number of Contemporaries*]¹⁶, an essay thought by the critic and poet of the *Echinox* literary magazine to be written by I. Negoîtescu. Dan Damaschin's claim lies in the following arguments: 1 – the perspective adopted by the issuer of the hard-to-swallow “truths” is one of leadership, a position that Negoîtescu assumed among the members of the Literary Circle during the University's return to Cluj; 2 – various passages from this “sum of intuitions, diagnoses and predictions regarding the psychology, ethos, potential and virtuality of the emerging literary figures”¹⁷ recall or are identical with some paragraphs from the correspondence with Radu Stanca. Indeed, the personal stamp betrays the author of these critical notes sprinkled with irony, just as Negoîtescu's style is recognizable behind “Manifestul Cercului Literar” [“The Manifesto of the Literary Circle”]. Any of the 13 playfully sharp portraits is eloquent in terms of collegial irony. For example, Dominic Stanca is evaluated thus:

...great dramatic talent, but his ambition is not commensurate with his talent, as otherwise he would work hard to overcome Romanian histrionics. lazy, as no one can become a great artist without a vast artistic culture (unless he were a genius, which does not seem to me to be the case). a good dose of sămănătorism”, removable only by being exposed to the most acute aestheticism. intellectual snobbery would be of great use to him¹⁸.

Another indicator of the fact that no one other than Negoîtescu compiled the literary document is the bias he casually demonstrates. As might be expected, his good friend Radu Stanca receives preferential treatment:

...extraordinary literary talent (perhaps the greatest talent of Romanian literature). If he had the artistic intelligence of Negoîtescu, he would be a universal writer. great aesthetic vocation, great cultural foundation. morbid modesty. lack of ambition that

¹⁵ Nonetheless, the epistolary novel proves that both Negoîtescu, and Radu Stanca used to have religious predispositions at least similar to those Balotă experienced.

¹⁶ Dan Damaschin, *Cercul Literar de la Sibiu/Cluj: glosse/restituiri/corespondențe* [*The Sibiu/Cluj Literary Circle: Glosses, Restorations, Correspondences*], Cluj-Napoca, Ecou Transilvan, 2013, pp. 131-137.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 128: “sumă de intuiții, diagnoze și prognoze privitoare la psihologia, ethosul, potențialul și virtualitățile unor personalități în devenire”.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 132: “mare talent dramatic, dar ambiția sa nu e pe măsura talentului, căci altfel ar munci din greu spre a depăși cabotinismul român. puturos, căci fără o mare cultură artistică nu poate ajunge un mare artist (decât în cazul în care ar fi geniu, ceea ce nu-mi pare). bună doză de sămănătorism, înlăturabilă numai prin înlănțuirea în brațele celui mai acut estetism. i-ar folosi enorm snobismul intelectual”.

could be fatal to his career. generous and devoted friend [...] fatal lack of a fulfilled love that would give meaning to his pride and ambition¹⁹.

The charming part of Negoîtescu's personality during the years of stylistic maturation is the strange achievement of reconciling his own megalomania (observed repeatedly by exegetes and confirmed by the document recovered by Dan Damaschin) with self-irony. The "uncomfortable truths" in the critic's own entry illustrates the aforementioned combination:

...naive and in good faith in his social relationships. some literary talent. extraordinary artistic intelligence and exceptional artistic taste in general. maximum aesthetic vocation. generous ambition pushed to the extreme, seeking to arouse in others enormous and disciplined, economical work. if he lives and keeps his mental faculties intact he will be capable of a great literary work. theoretical virtuosity, knows how to handle abstractions, which can lead him to an aesthetic system. much more modest than he seems. extremely honest with himself and with the society that does not deserve his fairness. strong spiritual life. great cultural foundation. time works in his favour²⁰.

In the archive entrusted to Dan Damaschin by I. Negoîtescu, other documents, also dating from 1946, present a similar self-ironic approach: two "laws" – "I – for the construction of the supreme forum of the group composed by Ștefan Aug. Doinaș, C. Regman, and I. Negoîtescu and II: for the establishment of May 13 as a holiday of the Literary Circle"²¹ – and the famous catalogue of group members in the form of a deck of playing cards. Some of these research annexes became known due to Petru Poantă's monograph²². The common denominator of those documents (besides their dating and Negoîtescu's strong imprint) is the unusual way in which self-irony serves as a clear ranking instrument of the members of the literary groups. I. Negoîtescu's *pseudo-self-irony* is an effective tool for consecrating privileged positions in the Sibiu Literary Circle. Instead of diminishing the authority of the issuers of the various ludic-official acts, self-irony

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 134-135: "extraordinar talent literar (poate cel mai mare talent al literaturii române). Dacă ar avea și inteligența artistică a lui Negoîtescu, ar fi un scriitor universal. mare vocație estetică, mare cultură în formație. modestie morbidă. Lipsă de ambiție care ar putea să fie fatală carierei lui. generos și prieten devotat [...] fatală lipsă a unei iubiri împlinite, care să dea sens orgoliului și ambiției sale".

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 136: "naiv și de bună credință în raporturile sociale. oarecare talent literar. extraordinară inteligență artistică și excepțional gust artistic general. vocație estetică maximă. ambiție generoasă și împinsă la extrem, căutând să stârnească și în ceilalți muncă enormă și disciplinată, economicoasă. dacă va trăi și își va păstra intacte facultățile mintale va fi capabil de o mare operă literară. virtuozitate teoretică, în jocul abstracțiilor, ceea ce îl poate duce la sistem estetic. mult mai modest decât pare. extrem de cinstit față de sine însuși și față de societatea care nu-i merită cinstea. puternică viață spirituală. mare cultură în formație. timpul lucrează în favoarea lui".

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 128.

²² Petru Poantă, *Cercul Literar de la Sibiu. Introducere în fenomenul original* [*The Sibiu Literary Circle. Introduction to the Original Phenomenon*], Cluj-Napoca, Clusium, 1997.

strengthens that “Supreme Forum”. Petru Poantă skillfully interprets *Decretul lege pentru constituirea Forului Suprem al Cercului Literar* [Decree Law for the Establishment of the Supreme Forum of the Literary Circle]:

The discreet parody of the official language cannot be misleading: this self-ironic “game” of hierarchies and competencies is very serious in its essence. In the initial social harmony of the group (especially from the time of the cenacle and the literary magazine) various animosities creep in, caused by human vanities, but also by more and more obvious value or temperamental differences. They will deepen over time, sometimes turning into resentful outbursts or intellectual adversity²³.

The verdict is also valid in the case of the list of uncomfortable truths, and in that of the playing cards catalogue. Dating back from the years of the elaboration of “Euphorionism” to the beginning of the literary group, the “harmony” to which Petru Poantă previously referred should not be absolutized. Although indeed, in the years of the literary cenacle and *Revista Cercului Literar* [Magazine of the Literary Circle], the offensive efforts were directed towards outsiders to the group, the most important controversies in which the Literary Circle engages in the 1943–1945 moment find I. Negoïtescu in the position of editor-in-chief. He conveys the reply (or rather the initiative) of the group in the literary landscape of the time. I am referring, first of all, to the campaign against (neo)“sămănătorism” in the 1940s, after which the umbrella term “pășunism” (from the Romanian word “pășune”, meaning pasture) was coined. However, this attack begins in the vicinity of the Literary Circle²⁴, and has a targeted character, the first great victim of I. Negoïtescu’s irony, can be identified by reading between the lines of the legitimizing documents of the Sibiu group. The attack of the critic targets the first master, Lucian Blaga.

Irony as a Style Effect

The anti-“pășunist” texts represent the battlefield on which Negoïtescu’s irony crystalizes. The most important articles of the respective controversy appear under signatures such as Damian Silvestru or Ioan Negoïtescu, and they are pronounced

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 18: “Discreta parodie a limbajului oficial nu poate induce în eroare: acest ‘joc’, auto-ironic, al ierarhiilor și competențelor, este în fond foarte serios. În armonia socială de început a grupării (îndeosebi din perioada ceneclului și a revistei) se strecoară diverse animozități, provocate de vanități omenești, dar și de tot mai evidente diferențe valorice sau temperamentale. Ele se vor adânci cu timpul, transformându-se câteodată, în puseuri resentimentare ori în adversități intelectuale”.

²⁴ If we consider Lucian Blaga as being outside the Literary Circle. As a participant in the group’s meetings, a contributor to *Revista Cercului Literar*, a friend, a model and a catalyst of the Sibiu group, can the professor be considered as an ex-centric? In exegeses and memoirs, the members of the Literary Circle of Sibiu are sometimes called *blagians*. Can Lucian Blaga be considered a member of the Literary Circle? An affirmative answer would be possible, but only with the mention of “honorific”.

on behalf of the entire Sibiu Literary Circle: “Manifestul Cercului Literar de la Sibiu” [“The Manifesto of the Literary Circle”] from *Viața*, May 13, 1943²⁵; “Câteva precizări” [“A few clarifications”] in *Viața*, June 3, 1943; “În jurul ‘prostului gust’. Răspuns domnului Vasile Netea [“Concerning ‘Bad Taste’. In Reply to Mr. Vasile Netea”] from *Timpul*, June 25, 1943; and the famous “Pășuniști și ‘nemuritori’” [“Pășunists and ‘Immortals’”] from *Saeculum*, February 1944.

Although exegeses sometimes portrays Negoîțescu as the sole architect behind the “Manifesto”, it is important to remember Ion Vartic’s clarification regarding the well-known text of the Sibiu Literary Circle: “The programmatic ideas there also belong to Radu Stanca and other members of the group. Although this letter was reviewed by Stanca before it was sent to the great critic, some critical accents survive that illustrate the spiritual extravagance of the one who wrote it”²⁶. Negoîțescu must therefore be detected precisely in those extravagant “critical accents”:

Transylvania did not produce a literary critic of its own, such an achievement being impossible, for criticism presupposes good taste and fair analysis that ultimately rejects regionalism and its annexes [...] The critic is a *summum* of discernment, lucidity, analysis and synthesis, and together they exclude the inferiority complex of the Transylvanian culture, which desires (if this is possible!) a “more Romanian” culture than that of the other brothers from beyond the mountains and the waters... A respectable intention, albeit an absurd one! That is why, in order to save the spirituality of this region, we need fast release from the anachronistic crust of “sămănătorism”, manifested in the bad taste of the endless research on Ilarie Chendi or Maria Cunțan...²⁷.

²⁵ Reproduced by I. Negoîțescu in one of the notes at the end of the volume *Un Roman Epistolar* [*An Epistolary Novel*], București, Albatros, 1978, pp. 368-374, and at the beginning of the volume *În cunoștință de cauză* [*Knowingly*], Cluj-Napoca, Dacia, 1991, pp. 6-12.

²⁶ Ion Vartic, “Lovitura de stat de la Cercul Literar”: “ideile programatice de acolo aparțin însă în egală măsură și lui Radu Stanca, și altor cerchiști. Deși înainte de a fi trimisă marelui critic scrisoarea aceasta a fost revăzută de Stanca, în ea au rămas unele accente critice care ilustrează extravaganța spirituală a celui care a redactat-o”.

²⁷ I. Negoîțescu, *În cunoștință de cauză* [*Knowingly*], Cluj-Napoca, Dacia, 1991, pp. 10-11: “Ardealul nu și-a dat sieși un critic literar, aceasta fiind imposibil, deoarece critica presupune bun gust și justă analiză, ceea ce refuză regionalismul și anexele lui [...] Criticul e un *summum* de discernământ, luciditate, analiză și spirit de sinteză, care împreună exclud complexul de inferioritate al culturalului ardelean, care vrea, (dacă se poate!) o cultură ‘mai românească’ decât a celorlalți frați de peste munți și de peste ape... Respectabilă intenție, dar absurdă! Iată de ce trebuie, spre salvarea spiritualității în această regiune, o cât mai grabnică liberare din crusta anacronică a sămănătorismului specifist, manifestat în prostul gust al interminabilelor cercetări asupra lui Ilarie Chendi sau Maria Cunțan...”. Ilarie Chendi (1871–1913) was a Romanian literary critic, one of the main supporters of “sămănătorism”, although possessing a different view of the literary movement compared to that of

Therefore, in the “Manifesto of the Literary Circle” (but also in the adjacent articles), Negoîtescu instrumentalizes irony in order to combat provincialism in culture, the confusion between the ethnic, the ethical and the aesthetic, which is a consequence of the “paroxysmal” resurrection of the “sămănătorist” spirit. The defining of the Sibiu Literary group is achieved by contrast with the favourable coordinates of such a retrograde spirit. According to Eugen Lovinescu’s literary ideology, ruralism, the privileged space of “pășunism” and the hearth of minor culture is opposed by urbanity and major culture. The collective character of folk creation is opposed to the “individual character of cultured literature”²⁸ and so on:

It was natural for a literature without a classical past to start from folk poetry, which, although a minor type of creation and mostly of ethnographic interest, was still a definite source for the great future possibilities meant to overcome those primordial forms up to the complete detachment of the educated, cultured patterns. Historical examples show that a major culture begins where the collective and undifferentiated forms are replaced by a type of creation released from the common and strictly individual magma of the personal²⁹.

In clarifying the Literary Circle’s reference to tradition, Dan Damaschin points to the real opponents of the manifesto: “Traditionalism, in the sense challenged by the members of the literary group, is the movement associated with this crisis and is manifested, in literary terms, by the proliferation of patriotic, regionalist, ‘pășunist’ poetry”³⁰. However, on closer inspection of the document of the Sibiu Literary Circle, it becomes increasingly clear that the model opposed in the manifesto begins to resemble the model represented by Lucian Blaga. The professor is not called out in the polemical approach of the Literary Circle, but the selection of the attacked concepts cannot be accidental (the opposition between minor culture and major culture is in itself eloquent):

Because it did not belong to him in the past, the Transylvanian Romanian suspected and continues to suspect the city of being “non-Romanian”. However, all the

Nicolae Iorga. Maria Cunțan (1862–1935) was a minor Romanian poet, almost forgotten nowadays, illustrative for the literary program of “sămănătorism”.

²⁸ „caracterul de creație individuală a literaturii culte”. Originally published in *Viața*, III, 1943, 764, (June 3), p. 2, reedited in *De la “elanul juvenil” la “visatul Euphorion”*, p. 204.

²⁹ I. Negoîtescu, *În cunoștință de cauză*, pp. 6-7: “Era firesc, pentru o literatură fără trecut clasic, să pornească de la poezia populară, care deși o creație minoră și în cea mai mare parte de interes etnografic, reprezenta totuși un izvor cert pentru marile posibilități viitoare, menite să depășească acele forme primordiale, până la completa detașare a tiparelor culte. Exemplele istorice ne arată că o cultură majoră începe acolo unde formele colective și nediferențiate sânt locuite cu o creație eliberată din magma comună și strict individuală a personalității”.

³⁰ Dan Damaschin, “*Cercul literar de la Sibiu/Cluj*”. *Deschidere spre europeism și universalitate* [“*The Sibiu/Cluj Literary Circle*”. *Openness to Europeanism and Universality*], Cluj-Napoca, Zenit, 2009, pp. 193-194: “Tradiționalismul, în accepția combătută de cerchiști, este curentul asociat acestei crize și se manifestă, în plan literar, prin proliferarea poeziei patriotarde, regionaliste, ‘pășuniste’”.

great cultures were accomplished in an urban environment, be it national or cosmopolitan, and they represented an urban kind of significance par excellence. The exaltation of the rural and the ethnic, although justifiable as social concerns, becomes a threatening vice when it tends to overwhelm the artistic phenomenon, which can only find its cultured and prosperous ambience, in the sense of major creation, only in urbanity and aesthetic exclusivity³¹.

The model of Lucian Blaga can no longer be perceived as merely a collateral victim of the irony of the Literary Circle. In his early monograph, Petru Poantă has the merit of analysing with the greatest precision the student's attack against the master. The representatives of "pășunism" serve only as a "jovial diversion", the main target of Negoîtescu's irony remaining *Elogiul satului românesc* [*The Eulogy of the Romanian Village*] and the philosophy of the "mioritic space": "The members of the Literary Circle (in fact, I. Negoîtescu) make a clear distinction between provincialism and the province as an autonomous space, susceptible to acculturation"³². Marta Petreu, who thoroughly investigated the complex report between Lucian Blaga and the letter-manifesto also agrees that the text performs the function of a symbolic parricide, even though several arguments in the document are a direct consequence of the philosopher's influence³³. Negoîtescu makes use of what Linda Hutcheon theorizes as the trans-ideological character of irony, which establishes power relations of the dominated-dominant type, thus trying to subvert the relationship with the model of Lucian Blaga: "Such a shift is only possible because of irony's trans-ideological nature: while irony can be used to reinforce authority, it can also be used to oppositional and subversive ends—and it can become suspect for that very reason"³⁴.

Since Lucian Blaga represents the wing of irrational modernity and ruralism, and since folk literature and the exaltation of the village occupy central positions in Blaga's artistic and philosophical work, the members of the Sibiu Literary Circle renounce (at this stage) the topic of the archetypal village and autochthonous mythology, preferring urbanity and the Western mythologies, the properties and prerogatives of major cultures:

³¹ I. Negoîtescu, *În cunoștință de cauză*, pp. 6-7: "Pentru că nu i-a aparținut în trecut, românul ardelean a suspectat și continuă să suspecteze ca 'neromânesc' orașul. Toate marile culturi s-au realizat însă în mediu urban, fie el național sau cosmopolit, și au reprezentat prin excelență o semnificație de urbanitate. Exaltarea ruralului și a etnicului, de justificat în preocupări sociale, devine un viciu amenințător atunci când tinde să copleșească fenomenul artistic, care nu-și poate afla ambianța cultă și prosperă, în sensul unei creații majore, decât în urbanitate și în exclusivitate estetică".

³² Petru Poantă, *Cercul Literar de la Sibiu*, p. 62: "Cerchiștii (de fapt, I. Negoîtescu) fac o distincție netă între provincialism și provincia ca spațiu autonom, eventual de aculturație".

³³ Marta Petreu, *Blaga, între legionari și comuniști*, pp. 282-285.

³⁴ Linda Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge. The Theory and Politics of Irony*, London and New York, Routledge, 2005, p. 28.

Only now do the philosopher's ideas become 'reactionary' in the version of the Literary Circle, because in reality Blaga's anti-'sămănătorism' was obscured by the prestige of the quasi-traditionalist theory of the 'mioritic space'. The conflict with radical traditionalists and Orthodox theologians also unfolded against the background of the ambiguity between autochthonism and modernism. The members of the group ironically detach themselves from this pathetic background, without directly involving Blaga. They are looking for the 'other tradition', which begins with the 'cosmopolitanism' and Latinity of the Transylvanian School³⁵.

"Pășuniști și 'nemuritori'" ["Pășunișts and 'Immortals'"] represents the peak of I. Negoțescu's irony manifest in the public space before the establishment of the communist regime. The text of *Saeculum* (1944) provides the public with the term that encompasses the retrograde orientations and cultural movements fought by the Sibiu Literary Circle, in the letter to E. Lovinescu and its appendices specified earlier. Perhaps at the time of publication, Negoțescu's definition referred to a more precise writing profile and targeted only the inferior literary production that emerged out of the confusion of values specified in the manifesto. However, due to the thematic aspect of "pășunism", the term acquires a lax usage. The category of the satirical term can extend to cover all rural-inspired literature, folk-inspired literature, patriotic literature etc. It becomes clear from the literary production of the members of the Sibiu Literary Circle themselves that the significance of the concept is expanding beyond the intention and control of I. Negoțescu. Eventually, the formula will make a career even "in the final stage of the communist regime and especially after 1989, when, amid the revitalization of the controversy between local and cosmopolitan groups, between 'crypto-communists' and anti-communists etc., 'pășunism' is invoked to blame any traditionalist trend"³⁶. It is therefore necessary to recall the definition issued by its ironic theorist:

But what a difference between these Virgilian creatures caught in the fine mould of Alecsandri, Arghezi, Blaga, and the modern and contemporary educated ones whose hearts are bellowing and whose souls bleat out of longing for the "village in which they were born" [...] Burned by the fever of exaltation when they scream the

³⁵ Petru Poantă, *Cercul Literar de la Sibiu*, p. 46: "Ideile filosofului devin 'reacționare' de abia acum, în varianta Cercului Literar, căci, în realitate, anti-sămănătorismul lui Blaga era obnubilat de prestigiul teoriei, cvasi-tradiționaliste, a «spațiului mioritic». Conflictul cu tradiționaliștii radicali și cu teologii ortodocși și-a consumat, și el, pe fondul ambiguității dintre autohtonism și modernism. Cerchiștii se detașează ironic de acest fundal patetic, fără a-l implica direct, pe Blaga. Ei sunt în căutarea 'celeilalte tradiții', care începe în 'cosmopolitismul' și latinitatea școlii ardelenene".

³⁶ Cosmin Borza, "Literatura rurală" ["Rural Literature"], in Corin Braga (ed.), *Enciclopedia imaginariilor din România I. Imaginar literar* [*Encyclopedia of Romanian Imaginaries I. Literary Imaginary*], Iași, Polirom, 2020, p. 197: "în etapa finală a regimului comunist și mai ales după 1989, când, pe fondul revitalizării polemicii dintre grupările autohtoniste și cele cosmopolite, dintre 'criptocomuniști' și anticomuniști etc., pășunismul este invocat pentru a blama orice tendință tradiționalistă".

word “culture” at every corner, all of them directors of patriotism, morality and poetry, in love with the “holy ground” only because they look at it from the comfortable armchair of the city they blaspheme, the pășunists picture themselves day and night either at the horns of the plough or at *Zamfira’s Wedding*, or courting *Dăscălița*... In the beginning, the pășunists were considered a kind of sect possessing no will of their own, which cultivated traditional customs: to brush their teeth after dinner, to wear lacquered shoes on Sundays, to attend festivals regularly, to tremble while reading *The Ostrogoth Queen*, to cry tenderly reading “Mamina” or “Tătunu” and to dance the tango but to ache after “sârba”³⁷.

However, Negoîțescu’s contemporary rival achieves an update: “he frequents Camil Petrescu, discusses Baudelaire, dresses like a Malagamba but thinks about restoring Maria Cunțan”³⁸. Negoîțescu’s irony is unleashed, reaffirming the rally to Eugen Lovinescu’s literary ideology, contested by the opponents of the Literary Circle at the time. The incisive critic will use traditionalism’s (in the retrograde sense) own rhetoric, citing stereotypical remarks in order to highlight the ridiculousness of provincialism and patriotic attitudes in the literary context of the time:

“Let us sing our longing!” They shouted pathetically. And the choir of “singers” uttered in synch the word betrayal! They organise folk gatherings with tears, moans, riots, “songs” and bellows, followed by parties (to ease their bitterness!) lifting the Romanian letters to the peaks of the Inău³⁹.

Negoîțescu subversively inventories the commonplaces of his adversaries’ rhetoric (“dor”, “șezători”, “chiote”, “amar”), ironizing their declamatory stylistics and their adherence to provincialism. The critic resorts to the instrumentalization of a cliché, that of using the prestige of a mountain peak of regional notoriety to illustrate the significance of national literature or of a literary personality.

³⁷ Published originally in *Saeculum*, II, 1944, 1 (January-February), pp. 78-81, reedited in I. Negoîțescu, *De la “elanul juvenil” la “visatul Euphorion”*, p. 258: “Dar ce deosebire între aceste virgilice creaturi, prinse în mulajul fin al lui Alecsandri, Arghezi, Blaga, și între școlarizații moderni și contemporani cărora le chiuie inima și le behăie sufletul de dorul ‘satului în care s-au născut’. [...] Arși de febra exaltării când țipă la orice colț de stradă cuvântul ‘cultură’, toți directori ai patriotismului, ai moralei și ai poeziei, înamorați de ‘țarina sfântă’ numai fiindcă o privesc din fotoliul comod al orașului pe care îl hulesc, pășuniștii se visează ziua și noaptea când la coarnele plugului, când la nunta Zamfirii, când făcând curte Dăscăliței... La început, pășuniștii au fost considerați ca un fel de sectă fără voie, care cultiva tradiționale obiceiuri: să stea cu scobitoarea în dinți după masă, să poarte duminica pantofi de lac, să frecventeze regulat festivalurile, să se cutremure citind Regina Ostrogoților, să plângă de duioși citind Mamina și Tătunu și să danseze tangoul dar să-i doară inima după sârbă”.

³⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 258-259: “frecventează pe Camil Petrescu, discută pe Baudelaire, se îmbracă malagambist, însă cugetă la restaurarea Mariei Cunțan”.

³⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 259: “‘Lăsați-ne să ne cântăm dorul!’ au țipat patetic. Și corul ‘cântăreților’ a rostit într-un glas cuvântul trădare! Au ținut șezători cu lacrimi, cu gemete, cu revolte, cu ‘cântece’, cu chiote, urmate de petreceri (ca să-și mai potolească amarul!) și au înălțat literile române până-n piscurile Inăului”.

Negoîtescu turns such a cliché against his adversaries, illustrating the significance of the national literature valued by the “pășunists” with the help of a provincial topos from the North of the country, less known and not counted among the highest peaks either. Thus, I. Negoîtescu highlights the alarming situation of the “Romanian letters”, from the point of view of the Literary Circle: the almost anonymous and isolated status of the national literature allowed by the literary climate of the Romanian 1940s. Instead, the members of the Literary Circle cultivate a different vision of Romanian spirituality. As stated at the end of the Manifesto:

For us, Romanian literature does not mean a closed phenomenon, spent on an autarchic shore, nor a picturesque contribution to European ethnography, but a young branch of continental spirituality, a branch crossed by the same sap and loaded with the same fruits, even if the land in which it has taken roots is different⁴⁰.

In addition to consolidating the main points of the group’s literary ideology, the article “Pășuniști și ‘nemuritori’” undertakes another complex action. On the one hand, the text pays homage to both masters of the Literary Circle (Lucian Blaga and Eugen Lovinescu), placing them on the same side of the barricade as true “destroyers of false idols” (perhaps as a gesture of acquittal in relation to the former), on the other hand, he launches another (not very) subtle attack on Blaga: “We are still struggling between the crystalline substrates of Latinity and the mudslides deposited by the Slavic waves. That clarity is destined to win is testified by the whole evolution of our culture, accustomed to the background of Maiorescianism”⁴¹. With one hand, Lucian Blaga is chosen by the author of the article as a counter-example to the “pășuniști”, differentiated from them on account of value and refinement, yet with the other, the professor is once again targeted (therefore considered as part of the “issue”) as demonstrated by the reference to “Revolta fondului nostru nelatin” [“The Revolt of Our Non-Latin Nature”], a famous article from the pages of *Gândirea* cultural magazine.

In the stage of shaping the “Euphorion” project, I. Negoîtescu tries to strengthen and nuance the position of the writing group in relation to the autochthonous literary tradition. Unlike the cases of other founding acts in Romanian literature, the moment of the Sibiu Literary Circle does not nullify the literary production that precedes the literary group. They do not build on the ashes of all their predecessors. On the contrary, the ambition of the Literary Circle is one

⁴⁰ I. Negoîtescu, *În cunoștință de cauză*, p. 12: “Pentru noi, literatura română nu înseamnă un fenomen închis, petrecut într-o țărâmură autarhică, nu o contribuție pitorească la etnografia europeană, ci o ramură tânără a spiritualității continentale, ramură străbătută de aceeași sevă și încărcată de aceleași roade, chiar dacă pământul în care s-au implantat rădăcinile este altul”.

⁴¹ I. Negoîtescu, *De la “elanul juvenil” la “visatul Euphorion”*, p. 260. “La noi se mai dă lupta între cristaline substraturi ale latinității și mâlurile depuse de valurile slave. Că e dat clarității să învingă, ne-o spune toată evoluția culturii noastre, care a cunoscut fundalul maioreșcianismului...”.

of healing, of re-establishing ties, of continuing high traditions (abandoned as a result of the “pășunist” excesses) of Western orientation, initiated by the Transylvanian “and Latinist” School. I. Negoîțescu and the rest of the group prefer one tradition over another, promoting a different understanding of national specificity and therefore a different kind of patriotism. In the present subchapter, the tradition and the acceptance of the national specificity that I. Negoîțescu did *not* choose are of interest for the following reasons. First, the examination of what a literary group (of which the author in question belongs) denies almost always proves to be substantial and revealing. And secondly, irony is one of the most important tools used by the critic in the process of dissociation and clarification mentioned above.

In retrospect, Negoîțescu defines the position and the program intended for *Euphorion* quite sharply:

After the war, in the moral chaos of that time (Romanians were beginning to show their true colour, that's why I felt the need for this radical aesthetic position, more radical than the one in the Manifesto, also born against the pășunism of the villains, the literary profiteers of war), when artistic youth was fleeing to join Western trends, existentialism, neo-surrealism, we, seemingly retrograde and provincial, with our “ballad” and our neo-romanticism, wanted for the first time to ignore Western timeliness, not useful to us, and delve into our own severe structural problems: to write tragedies with non-Romanian themes, saving Romanians by fleeing everything Romanian!”⁴².

In the fragment above, the meaning of “Romanian” is clearly that which Negoîțescu and the former signers of the manifesto rebel against i.e.: precisely that “picturesque contribution to European ethnography”. Or, brutally simplifying for the sake of illustration, rurality and folk art are the “great accomplices” of such an ethnological understanding, and, therefore, of the Romanian specificity from which the cosmopolitan Negoîțescu “flees”.

The *Few Clarifications* that the members of the Literary Circle (united under the writing banner of the same critic) brought in support of the Manifesto, meant to exonerate them in relation to the attack on the minor culture and rural issues, only manage to deepen the controversy. I. Negoîțescu's irony can be noticed once more:

⁴² I. Negoîțescu, Virgil Nemoianu, “Epistolar” [“Letters”], *Apostrof*, 1998, 6, p. 17: “După război, în haosul moral de atunci (românii începeau să-și dea arama pe față, de aceea am simțit nevoia acestei radicale poziții estetice, mai radicală decât cea din Manifest, și el născut împotriva pășunismului canaliilor, profitorilor literari de război), când tineretul artistic fugea spre moda occidentală, spre existențialism, neo-suprarealism, noi, aparent retrograzi și provinciali, cu „balada” și neoromantismul, pentru întâia oară voiam să ignorăm actualitatea occidentală, care nu ne era de folos, și să ne adâncim în gravele noastre probleme de structură: să scriem tragedii cu teme ne-românești, salvarea românilor prin fuga de românesc!”.

One clarification: We hold nothing against folk art. We appreciate its delicious authenticity as well as the naive feeling that runs through it. However, we are against a cultural form of compromise, in which foreign interests invade the aesthetic, philosophical or scientific field. [...] We understand the power of the national feeling, as well as its close connection with the life of the village, therefore explaining a certain idealized conception of the village, as well as the moralizing tendency that emerges from it. But we do not understand why this idealising way of thinking, taken to didacticism, should become a criterion for judging a work of art⁴³.

In the public space, the attacks of the Sibiu Literary Circle appear well-chosen and moderate, so that the important exegesis agrees (to a large extent) with the fact that the perspective of the group is one of common sense (intellectual, aesthetic, political). However, in the more personal environment of the memoir, or in that of the cordial correspondence, I. Negoîtescu is not exempt from all anti-rural biases. The most conclusive evidence that the critic's attack on "pășunism" is not limited to the aesthetic/value criterion, but that it also contains a biographical kind of prejudice, can be identified due to the admirable sincerity displayed in *Straja Dragonilor* [*The Wake of the Dragons*]. The following example is the most severe: "I have discovered myself in Mrs. Bengescu's novels because that was my true homeland. The consciousness of my own urbanity (the lack of tenderness towards the village and the peasants has always characterized me) has definitely become clear to me"⁴⁴.

The anti-rural confessions are not negligible in Negoîtescu's memoirs, as they can serve as an explanation for a tendency in the critical project of the author. The severity of the critic is not limited to combating "sămănătorist" attitudes, but it also extends to writers of hardly disputable quality, who, unfortunately for them, happen to favour a rural theme. An eloquent example is the ironic way in which Negoîtescu refers to Liviu Rebreanu. In the chapter dedicated to the novelist in *Analize și sinteze* [*Analyzes and Syntheses*]⁴⁵, repeated in *Istoria literaturii române* [*History of Romanian Literature*], the critic disqualifies the novel *Gorilla*, as "so badly written that this very formal fact raises questions about the validity and

⁴³ I. Negoîtescu, *De la "elanul juvenil" la "visatul Euphorion"*, pp. 203-204: "O precizare: Nu suntem împotriva artei populare. Apreciem autenticitatea ei savuroasă precum și sentimentul naiv care o străbate. Suntem însă împotriva unei forme culturale de compromis, în care interese străine invadează domeniul estetic, filosofic sau științific. [...] Înțelegem puterea sentimentului național, precum și legătura lui strânsă cu viața satului, și de aici – apoi – o anumită concepție idealizată a satului, precum și tendința moralizatoare ce se desprinde din ea. Dar nu înțelegem ca această concepție idealizantă, dusă la didacticism, să fie criterii judecată a operei de artă".

⁴⁴ I. Negoîtescu, *Straja dragonilor* [*The Watch of the Dragons*], Cluj-Napoca, Biblioteca Apostrof, 1994, p. 178: "Mă descoperisem pe mine însumi în romanele doamnei Bengescu, pentru că asta-mi era patria. Conștiința propriei mele urbanități (lipsa duioșiei față de sat și țărani m-a caracterizat întotdeauna) s-a limpezit definitiv în mine".

⁴⁵ I. Negoîtescu, *Analize și sinteze* [*Analyzes and Syntheses*], București, Albatros, 1976, pp. 157-165.

significance of his approach”⁴⁶. Gabriela Gavril also notes the more peculiar harshness of the way in which Rebreanu is treated in Negoîtescu’s long-awaited synthesis: “the critic avoids the monumental novels of the prose writer, but chooses to analyse the detective work *Amândoi*, in which he detects, with perhaps ironic enthusiasm, ‘indisputable proof of professional craftsmanship’, and the naturalistic short stories”⁴⁷. In *Scriitori contemporani* [*Contemporary Writers*], on the occasion of the publication of Liviu Rebreanu’s *Journal*, the Transylvanian prose writer is ironized again:

Given the writer’s inadequacy of expression, not amended in this case precisely out of respect for documentary authenticity, the artistic value of the *Journal* is almost non-existent. [...] However, considering at the same time the fact that Liviu Rebreanu occupies a privileged place in the history of the Romanian novel, his diary notations are of interest nevertheless, given the different levels they involve⁴⁸.

The list can continue with excerpts from articles dedicated to the works of Octavian Goga, Ion Pillat, B. Fundoianu, V. Voiculescu, Ioan Alexandru etc., although the critic is not always reductive when interpreting their writing. A last example of Negoîtescu’s anti-rural irony that deserves to be mentioned is the chapter dedicated to Al. Vlahuță from *Alte însemnări critice* [*Other Critical Notes*]:

As a poet, Alexandru Vlahuță is no longer of interest to literary history except for the fact that he influenced, in their beginnings, some true poets who became something else, finally surpassing him, such as V. Voiculescu. [...] Never does his prose rise to the level of art, and his portrait by Nicolae Iorga [...] is worth more than Vlahuță’s entire work⁴⁹.

⁴⁶ I. Negoîtescu, *Istoria literaturii române: (1840–1945)* [*History of Romanian Literature: (1840–1945)*], Cluj-Napoca, Dacia, 2002, p. 259: “atât de rău scris, încât ridică prin chiar acest fapt formal întrebări asupra valabilității și semnificației demersului său”.

⁴⁷ Gabriela Gavril, *Cercul literar de la Sibiu. De la Manifest la Adio, Europa!* [*The Sibiu Literary Circle. From the Manifesto to Adio, Europa!*], Iași, Fides, 2001, p. 81: “interpretul ocolește romanele monumentale ale prozatorului, oprindu-se la o scriere polițistă, *Amândoi*, în care detectează cu un entuziasm poate ironic «un incontestabil meșteșug profesional», și la nuvelele naturaliste”.

⁴⁸ I. Negoîtescu, *Scriitori contemporani* [*Contemporary Writers*], Ploiești, Paralela 45, 2000, p. 597: “Având în vedere însă insuficiența de expresie a scriitorului, neamendată în acest caz tocmai din respect față de autenticitatea documentară, valoarea artistică a Jurnalului e aproape nulă. [...] Dar având în vedere totodată faptul că Liviu Rebreanu ocupă un loc privilegiat în istoria romanului românesc, notațiile sale jurnaliere prezintă oricum interes, pe diferitele planuri ce le implică”.

⁴⁹ I. Negoîtescu, *Alte însemnări critice* [*Other Critical Notes*], București, Cartea Românească, 1980, pp. 46–47: “Ca autor de versuri, Alexandru Vlahuță nu mai interesează istoria literară decât prin împrejurarea că a influențat, la începuturile lor, poeți adevărați, care au devenit altceva, depășindu-l precum V. Voiculescu. [...] Niciodată însă proza sa nu se ridică la nivelul artei, și acest portret pe care i l-a trasat Nicolae Iorga [...] valorează mai mult decât întreaga-i operă”.

In the meantime, authors who have played significant roles in the biography of the critic, such as Ion Agârbiceanu, Lucian Blaga, sometimes even Mihai Beniuc benefit from preferential treatment. Purposeful ignorance is also part of Negoîtescu's critical arsenal. As stated by Ov. S. Crohmălniceanu: "His silences are therefore significant and eloquent in some cases"⁵⁰. Certainly, one of the cases to which the exegete refers is that of Nicolae Labiş, who is absent from Negoîtescu's writings.

Ethical Irony

The last avatar of I. Negoîtescu's irony is the ethical one, employed in relation to the historical reality. If during World War II, unlike the Albatross group, Negoîtescu and the Literary Circle missed the opportunity of ethical engagement in relation to the reality of war, the critic no longer opts for a similar position at full maturity.

The mutation from the romantic, aesthetic kind of irony to ethical irony starts with the realization of the importance of political action in relation to the real by revealing malfunctions in the politics of the communist regime in Romania. The point of reference for such a turn is Negoîtescu's involvement with the movement for human rights in 1977. In view of the fact that the pioneer of the movement in Romanian was Paul Goma, and since the prose writer's commitment to the 1977 cause was the most iconic, the movement for human rights in the Socialist Republic of Romania is also known as "The Goma Movement".

Among the many international (and national) developments associated with the movement for human rights, the most important event which made the Romanian version of the phenomenon possible is the elaboration of the Czechoslovakian Charter 77. The influence of the Charter, publicly issued at the beginning of 1977, spread throughout the Eastern Bloc by means of signatures and letters of solidarity, functioning as a catalyst for the advancement of natural rights. Essentially, Paul Goma is the Romanian receptacle of the Charter. As early as January 1977, Goma urges his guild colleagues to approve of a letter of solidarity and join the signatories of Charter 77. After the attempt fails, the writer individually assumes public solidarity with the civic initiative in a message to Pavel Kohout and his collaborators. The public letter marks the beginning of "The Goma Movement". Other than in the letters of adherence, the spiritual profile of "The Goma Movement" is contained in documents such as "The Open Letter to the Belgrade Conference Attendees", Paul Goma's famous letters to Nicolae Ceauşescu, the author's interviews given abroad, the notes written during his

⁵⁰ Ovid S. Crohmălniceanu, Klaus Heitmann, *Cercul literar de la Sibiu*, p. 286: "Tăcerile lui sunt astfel, în anumite cazuri semnificative şi grăitoare".

imprisonment in Rahova and so on. The principles of “The Goma Movement” as a movement for human rights resonate with those of the corresponding phenomena in the Soviet Union or in the Eastern European socialist states: “they did not frame a political opposition but requested the observance of the provisions of internal and international acts regarding human rights”⁵¹. The autobiographical novel, *Culoarea curcubeului '77 (cutremurul oamenilor)* [*The Colour of the Rainbow '77 (The People's Earthquake)*] represents the epic of “The Goma Movement” of 1977. I. Negoitescu's ethical turn is accounted for in the pages of the novel, where Paul Goma employs the literary critic's fictionalized figure.

Both nationally and internationally, the main vehicle of “The Goma Movement” were the Western radio stations, particularly Radio Free Europe. The letter expressing solidarity with the Charter and “The Open Letter to the Belgrade Conference Attendees”, once broadcasted, managed to advertise the movement to the international public and to attract more adherents from inside the country. However, only two representatives of the autochthonous intellectual scene publicly expressed their support for the movement, namely Ion Vianu and I. Negoitescu. In *Culoarea curcubeului '77*, the fortifying encounter with the literary critic is a major event:

The arrival of the literary critic and historian Ion Negoitescu surprised me. In a good way, of course. Finally, a writer, one of the most respected, most upright, decided to join us. I no longer hoped for such a miracle. I had given up, I had almost become accustomed to the non-writers, to their much greater troubles, to their tragedies, deeper than those of the writers; I was accustomed even to the unflattering “appreciations” that some great writers, for some time, had been addressing me – who, in a flash, had lost my talent (if I ever had it, which is not at all certain...). And now, behold Negoitescu in my house – for the first time⁵².

The meeting occurred one day prior to the devastating earthquake of 1977. Negoitescu's entry in Goma's diary (“Thursday, March the 3rd. Between 14.30 - 18.10”) is recorded as “Very important!”⁵³. Indeed, the literary critic's contribution, i.e. the writing and dissemination abroad of the “Scrisoare către Paul

⁵¹ Ana-Maria Cătănuș, “A Case of Dissent in Romania in the 1970s: Paul Goma and the Movement for Human Rights”, *Arhivele Totalitarismului*, XIX, 2011, 3-4, p. 200.

⁵² Paul Goma, *Culoarea curcubeului '77 (cutremurul oamenilor)* [*The Colour of the Rainbow '77 (The People's Earthquake)*], Oradea, Ratio et Revelatio, 2015, p. 177: „Venirea criticului și istoricului literar Ion Negoitescu mă surprinsese. În bine, desigur. În sfârșit, un scriitor, unul dintre cei mai respectați, mai verticali, se decisese să se lipească de noi. Nu mai speram într-o asemenea minune. Mă resemnasem, aproape mă obișnuisem cu nescritorii, cu necazurile lor, mult mai mari, cu tragediile lor, mai profunde decât ale scriitorilor; obișnuit eram chiar și cu „aprecierile” deloc măgulitoare pe care unii scriitori de primă mărime le făceau, de la o vreme, la adresa mea – care, fulgerător, îmi pierdusem talentul (dacă îl avusesem vreodată, ceea ce nu e deloc sigur...). Și iată-l pe Negoitescu în casa mea – pentru întâia oară”.

⁵³ *Ibidem*, p. 176: “Între 14,30 – 18,10: Negoitescu. Foarte important!”.

Goma” [“Letter to Paul Goma”], strengthened the prestige of the movement and offered it a representative in the department where Goma’s civic initiative was most deficient: the public solidarity of the Romanian literary elite. After being exposed to the content of the letter, Paul Goma realized “that Negoïtescu’s text was of paramount importance: finally, a real text – focused, on point – better than my open letters, not to mention the Common Letter (on which I had already collected 75 signatures)”⁵⁴. I. Negoïtescu’s “Letter to Paul Goma”, broadcasted on Radio Free Europe is proof of the literary critic’s change of heart with regard to the writer’s political duty.

Guaranteeing a larger audience, Negoïtescu’s letter does not miss the opportunity to sound the alarm concerning the lamentable condition of the Romanian literary climate at the time:

Anyone who goes through the pages of Romanian magazines can only be horrified by the low level of verse and prose, by the artificiality, the uselessness and the outrageous inferiority of the critical debates. Our literary press offers the dull spectacle of a permanent and vast meeting in which there is so much talking that nothing is ever being said⁵⁵.

Taking advantage of the historic moment, I. Negoïtescu internationally displays his critical and ironic spirit in an action which both recalls and axiologically exceeds the Manifesto of the Literary Circle:

Statues are not moments of our actions, but respites for our spiritual recollection; instead, our current literary administration tends to propose tradition as a whole park of statues, which would make Romanian literature into a vast cemetery. Actually, a cemetery with mutilated monuments: for the works of the classics appear in mutilated editions [...]. Don’t these statues behold us with the only life they are allowed: by weeping?⁵⁶

The “Letter to Paul Goma” earned Negoïtescu his arrest and humiliating interrogations at the State Security premises in Calea Rahovei street. Threatened with prosecution for homosexuality, the critic was blackmailed by the regime into

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 178: “Mi-am dat seama că textul lui Negoïtescu avea o importanță capitală: în sfârșit, un adevărat text – concentrat, la obiect –, mai bun decât scrisorile-deschise ale mele, ca să nu mai vorbim de Scrisoarea comună (pe care adunasem deja 75 de semnături)”.

⁵⁵ I. Negoïtescu, *În cunoștință de cauză*, p. 15: “Oricine deschide paginile revistelor românești nu poate fi decât îngrozit de nivelul jos al versurilor și prozei, de artificialitatea, inutilitatea și inferioritatea strigătoare la cer a dezbaterilor critice. Presa noastră literară oferă spectacolul anost al unei permanente și vaste ședințe, în care se vorbește mult ca să nu se spună nimic”.

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 17: “Statuile nu sunt momente ale acțiunii noastre, ci popasuri ale reculegerii noastre spirituale; or, actuala noastră administrație literară are tendința de a propune tradiția ca pe un neîntrerupt parc de statui, ceea ce ar face din literatura română un vast cimitir. Și încă un cimitir cu monumente mutilate: căci operele clasicilor apar în ediții trunchiate [...]. Oare nu ne privesc aceste statui cu singura viață care le este îngăduită: plânsul?”.

retracting his statements and publishing the exculpatory article “Despre patriotism” [“On Patriotism”]. Other negative outcomes of the solidarity letter include the author’s repeated contemplation of suicide and a decisive step towards exile. Despite all the aforementioned consequences, Negoîtescu managed to honor Romanian literature by restoring, even for a very brief moment, what it lacked the most at the time: “a splendid and benevolent critical spirit”⁵⁷. After that moment, crucial in I. Negoîtescu’s biography, his discourse acquires an increasingly pronounced, politically engaged dimension. The exile years abound in political texts, characterizing the latter period of Negoîtescu’s life. The following fragment from the 1989 “Conversation with Ion Solacolu” in Munich is illustrative of the aforementioned development:

I myself underestimated politics, and I said this repeatedly. I didn’t realize that. It was only after the Goma movement that I realized that I myself was on the wrong path because I considered that the act of not manifesting yourself politically is itself political, that abstaining from politics is political enough. Unfortunately, this was not the case⁵⁸.

The ethical stance of the critic is mostly contained in the volume *În cunoștință de cauză*, as well as in his epistolary activity, in the interviews and memoirs of the exile years. However, as a consequence of Negoîtescu’s ethical turn, *Istoria literaturii române* [History of Romanian Literature] will also be infused with ideological interpretation, an alternative to the aesthetic one. For the most part, I. Negoîtescu’s ethical irony can be found in the volume subtitled *political texts*.

One by one, I. Negoîtescu’s ethical irony targets the Marxist ideology, the communist party, the politically uninvolved Romanian intellectuals, the *diffident* people, the self-sufficient Romanian diaspora, the collaborationist intellectuals, the false dissidents, Ceaușescu’s nationalism and Nicolae Ceaușescu himself. There are many examples available. In “Al doilea interviu în ziarul *Die Welt*” [“The Second Interview in *Die Welt*”], Negoîtescu states: “The history of the communist states is in fact the history of their struggle against the chaos they themselves generate, rather than that of the realization of the ideals they proclaim”⁵⁹. In the manner of the controversial literary articles, the political texts of the Transylvanian critic create the impression of an ironic theorist. *În cunoștință de cauză* provides numerous terms and concepts which encapsulate unfortunate historical realities. Such an example is “terror by festivity” – “an extremely refined form of practicing

⁵⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 17 : “un splendid și binefăcător spirit critic”.

⁵⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 48: “Eu însumi am subapreciat politicul, și am spus lucrul acesta în repetate rânduri. Nu mi-am dat seama de asta. Abia după mișcarea Goma mi-am dat seama că eu însumi eram pe o cale greșită, deoarece consideram că o politică este și faptul de a nu te manifesta politic, că abținerea de la politică este o politică. Or, din păcate s-a dovedit că nu este așa”.

⁵⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 21: “Istoria statelor comuniste este mai multo istorie a luptei lor cu haosul pe care ele însele le generează, decât a realizării idealurilor pe care le proclamă”.

fear, and its morbid character belongs to the very essence of Ceaușescu's nationalism, indicating that the incompatibility of nationalism with liberalization could not be clearer"⁶⁰. Another example is the state of "diffidence", described by Negoîtescu not as the "opposite of the *dissident* but as its preparatory state. [...] We are not cowards, we are not afraid, we are just *diffidents*"⁶¹. In "Poezia politică în România de astăzi" ["Political Poetry in Today's Romania"], the irony of Negoîtescu turns into sarcasm:

This may explain the fact that, doped with nectar and ambrosia, Romanians have come to indulge in this enchanting excitement, so that, although newspapers around the world mourn for them, they endure the cold and hunger as heavenly gifts, so in the midst of terror the Romanian feels 'in his own element', as Grigore Alexandrescu would put it⁶².

Samples of ironic, anti-communist attacks may continue. They abound in texts such as "Ceaușescu și Kafka" ["Ceaușescu and Kafka"], "Geo Bogza sau 'ca să fii om întreg'" ["Geo Bogza or 'to be a complete human being'"], "Convorbire cu Ion Solacolu" etc. The engagement of Negoîtescu's critical discourse against the left-wing dictatorship is also the point that contributes decisively to the importance of the Transylvanian critic in the context of Romanian culture.

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⁶⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 24: "o formă extrem de rafinată de practicare a fricii, iar caracterul ei morbid ține de esența însăși a naționalismului lui Ceaușescu, indicând cum nu se poate mai clar incompatibilitatea acestui naționalism cu liberalizarea".

⁶¹ *Ibidem*, p. 35: "opusul dizidentului, ci o postură pregătitoare a sa. [...] Nu suntem lași, nu suntem fricoși, suntem difidenți".

⁶² *Ibidem*, p. 76: "Poate așa se și explică împrejurarea că, dopați cu nectar și ambrozie, românii au ajuns a se complăce în această feerică excitație, încât, cu toate că ziarele din lumea întreagă le plâng de milă, ei suportă frigul și foamea ca pe daruri paradisiace, iar în teroare, românul se simte, vorba lui Grigore Alexandrescu, 'ca-n elementul său'".

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THE IRONY OF ION NEGOIȚESCU

(Abstract)

The 10th of august 2021 marks the 100th anniversary of Ion Negoițescu's birth. During his stage in the Sibiu Literary Circle and in the literary activity that followed the separation of the group, Negoitescu's writing distinguishes itself by revealing a very strong personality, severe in his critical judgement, who made a significant contribution to the overall image of the Romanian literature, despite a bio-bibliographical destiny haunted by hazards. Irony is a fundamental part of his critical and ideological ammunition. The purpose of this article is to identify the role and the consequences of irony in his literary activity, to pinpoint the types of literature and writers that the critic mocks, to observe the rhetoric and weapons of his irony. In order to analyse the types and the roles of Negoitescu's irony, one has to consider the author's studies of literary history, his autobiographical writings, literary journalism and his epistolary activity.

Keywords: irony, I. Negoitescu, the Sibiu Literary Circle, literary history, "pasturism".

IRONIA LUI ION NEGOIȚESCU

(Rezumat)

Data de 10 august 2021 marchează împlinirea a o sută de ani de la nașterea lui Ion Negoitescu. Atât în perioada sa cerchistă, cât și în activitatea literară de după, Negoitescu se distinge în scriitura sa printr-o personalitate foarte puternică, care se manifestă sever în judecățile sale critice, contribuind semnificativ la imaginea în ansamblu a literaturii române, în ciuda unui destin bio-bibliografic presărat cu hazarde. Ironia este o parte fundamentală a arsenalului său critic și ideologic. Scopul acestui articol este de a identifica rolul și consecințele ironiei în activitatea sa literară, a repera cu precizie tipurile de literatură și scriitori ironizate de critic, a vedea care sunt retorica și armele ironiei sale. Pentru a analiza felurile și rolurile ironiei lui I. Negoitescu se iau în calcul atât studiile sale de istorie literară, cât și paginile autobiografice, publicistica și activitatea sa epistolară.

Cuvinte-cheie: ironie, I. Negoitescu, Cercul Literar de la Sibiu, istorie literară, "pășunism".

ROSA DEL CONTE'S "ART OF TRANSLATION" BETWEEN CRITICISM AND PRACTICE¹

Rosa Del Conte was an eminent philologist, critic and translator. She is especially referred to as the author of the well-known essay *Mihai Eminescu o dell'Assoluto* [*Mihai Eminescu or About the Absolute*], acknowledged by M. Eliade as "the most extensive foreign-language monograph dedicated to Mihai Eminescu"². However, the intellectual experience of Del Conte cannot be reduced to a single title or less, to her professorship at an important Italian university.

The intense promotion and dispersion of Romanian culture in Italy carried out by the Romanian language and literature professor at the University of Rome are not limited to her professional, didactic commitment to her students, nor to the diligence with which she committed herself to the study of history and literary criticism. In fact, consistent with her own *officium*, Rosa Del Conte transformed her intellectual and academic experience into a sustainable laboratory of knowledge and interpretation. Her entire formation, research and reflection constitute a complex and ambitious critical exercise. The result is the profound and multi-faceted knowledge of her research field.

Her desire to reach this aim is clearly visible in Rosa Del Conte's bidimensional intellect. In her work she is capable of combining the complementary skills of both the philologist and the literary critic. This duality manifests itself in her informed literary translations where she successfully merges art and science.

The dialectic of the two components of Rosa Del Conte's classical training, philology and literary criticism, crystallizes in the application of such knowledge to the field of translation. In her opinion, a good translation is actually based on "a

¹ This contribution was occasioned by the Summer School for PhD and Master students and young philology researchers entitled "The faces of irony in literature and criticism", organized by BBU (Faculty of Letters, Department of Romanian Literature and Literary Theory) and The Ipotești Memorial House and National Center for Eminescu Studies, on 30 June 2020. The development and in-depth approach of this study were rendered possible by consulting the Del Conte Archive, preserved by the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart in Milan. My research internships were carried out under the aegis of the Toniolo Institute, which provided me with the materials in the Del Conte Archive and Collections.

² Mircea Eliade, "Postfață" ["Postface"], in Rosa Del Conte, *Eminescu sau despre Absolut* [*Eminescu or about the Absolute*]. Edition and preface by Marian Papahagi, foreword by Zoe Dumitrescu-Buşulenga, postface by Mircea Eliade, Cluj-Napoca, Dacia, 1990, p. 454: "cea mai vastă monografie închinată, într-o limbă străină, lui Mihai Eminescu".

philologically correct reading trace”³.

It is in this spirit that we must read the renowned article published in *Belfagor* and entitled “Le brutte infedeli ovvero Quasimodo interprete di Arghezi” [“The Unfaithful Ugliest or Quasimodo, Interpreter of Arghezi”]⁴, which, as F. Donatiello acknowledges in a recent study entitled “Salvatore Quasimodo traduttore di Tudor Arghezi” [“Salvatore Quasimodo, translator of Tudor Arghezi”]⁵, is dedicated to a “case of *auteur* translation not influenced by philological concerns”⁶. Donatiello states that “Quasimodo conceives literary translation as an anti-academic operation, strongly connected to poetic subjectivity”⁷. Professor Del Conte comes to a seemingly similar conclusion; however, she does not appreciate this kind of approach and harshly criticises the attempt to achieve a “transposition of the poetic universe”⁸ of the Arghezian writings aimed for the Italian cultural and linguistic space.

My aim is not to propose an *a posteriori* “value judgement” regarding Quasimodo’s Arghezian translations. I would rather exploit Rosa Del Conte’s short essay in order to extrapolate a second level of reading, one that develops from the expression contained in the title: “le brutte infedeli” [“the unfaithful ugliest”]⁹. Therefore, my focus will not be on *the quality of the translations*, but on *the intrinsic meaning of the act of translation*, and on *the deontology of translation*¹⁰.

My goal will be to highlight the role that such significant turns of phrasing play in the construction of a scientific and literary discourse which, surprisingly, finds its own keywords in the use of antiphrasis, irony and sarcasm¹¹.

³ Rosa Del Conte, “Premessa”, in Mihai Eminescu, *Poesie*. Edited by Rosa Del Conte, Modena – Madrid, Mucchi – Fundación Cultural Rumana, 1989, p. VII: “una traccia di lettura filologicamente corretta e, grazie al lungo esercizio critico sull’autore, anche sul piano interpretativo sicura”.

⁴ Rosa Del Conte, “Le brutte infedeli ovvero Quasimodo interprete di Arghezi”, *Belfagor*, 1966, 31 luglio, 4, pp. 471-482.

⁵ Federico Donatiello, «Salvatore Quasimodo traduttore di Tudor Arghezi», in Teresa Franco et Cecilia Piantanida (eds.), *Echoing Voices in Italian Literature: Tradition and Translation in the 20th Century*, Newcastle upon Tyne, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018, pp. 202-216.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 202: “caso di traduzione d’autore non influenzata da preoccupazioni filologiche”.

⁷ *Ibidem*: “Quasimodo concepisce la traduzione letteraria come un’operazione antiaccademica e fortemente legata alla soggettività poetica”.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 213: “trasposizione dell’universo poetico”

⁹ Given the origin of the expression used in translation studies “le brelle infedeli” [“the unfaithful beauties”], I align to the solution adopted by Fredrick Burwick, “Romantic Theories of Translation”, *The Wordsworth Circle*, 39, 2008, 3, pp. 68-74.

¹⁰ In an article published in 2011, D. Condrea Derer emphasizes the existence of a deontology of the act of translation and of the literary criticism. Doina Condrea-Derer, “Dezamăgirile Rosei Del Conte” [“Rosa de Conte’s Dissappointments”], *Orizzonti culturali italo-romeni*, 2011, 1, http://www.orizonturicentrale.ro/ro_studii_Doina-Derer-despre-Rosa-del-Conte.html. Accessed July 10, 2021.

¹¹ The debate opened by Rosa Del Conte can certainly be read as an interesting example of the use of irony as a tool. Irony is a tool that Salvatore Quasimodo also uses in countering the criticism levelled

Rosa Del Conte and her Archive

Rosa Del Conte is a fascinating and many-sided figure. She was born at the beginning of the 20th century (1907), in Voghera, and she lived through the whole "secolo breve", departing this life at the age of 104 in Rome. Hers was a humanistic education. She specialised in literature, philology and philosophy. After graduating from a classical high school, she completed her studies at the Faculty of Letters of the University of Milan on October 30, 1931, with a thesis in philosophy coordinated by professor A. Banfi. The title of her thesis was *La critica di Renato Serra* [*Renato Serra's Criticism*]¹².

Her encounter with Romania occurred approximately a decade later. After having taught for a few years and qualified as a high school teacher, Rosa Del Conte applied to the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to teach abroad. She passed the selection in 1939, thus starting teaching Italian in Romania (1942). She lived there for six years, at first in Bucharest, where she started collaborating with the Italian Studies Department of the University (1946), and later on in Cluj, where she moved in the autumn of the following year.

She finally moved back to Italy in 1948: as a consequence of the proclamation of the Popular Republic of Romania, the Ministry of Public Education terminated the contracts of the foreign teaching staff employed by Universities. Her return marked a turning point in Rosa Del Conte's existential and educational path and academic career. Upon returning home, she focused on the study and teaching of Romanian language and literature in Milan and Rome. The Romanian experience was for Rosa Del Conte a double learning laboratory. It was an apprenticeship that allowed her to develop and emphasise, on the one hand, her double nature, namely that of a translator and a literary critic and, on the other hand, her skills as a scholar in Italian and Romanian studies. The entire intellectual activity of Rosa Del Conte combines the Italian cultural underlay with the Romanian overlay. Her education is rooted in her classical formation, which gave her – first and foremost – a working methodology. The "Romanian turn" of her maturity was grafted on this. It flourished on this philological underlay. Nonetheless, there can be no talk of two clear-cut and independent cultural moments; in fact, every page written by Rosa Del Conte, as well as her university courses, are a testament to the profoundly intertwined nature of these two elements, indicative of this cognitive duality which, in her view, constituted a *continuum*.

Her personal library and archive, donated in 2012 to the Giuseppe Toniolo

at him. In this particular context, irony fits into the repertoire of rhetoric, finding an effective means of expression in the antiphrasis.

¹² For bibliographic information, see "Busta 3, Archivio 1, Fondo Del Conte". Renato Serra (1884–1915) was an important Italian literary critic and writer of traditional and national orientation of the early 20th century. In his works, later critics identified elements of *critica stilistica* (stylistic criticism).

Institute (Università Cattolica, Milan) are the mirror of her intellectual path and of her interests. The Del Conte collection, as an example of transversality and interdisciplinarity, represents the synthesis of the desire for knowledge that characterised her entire intellectual and cognitive journey. M.L. Pozzi notes an inclination towards universality when he describes the heterogeneous complexity of the materials preserved in the Del Conte library, ranging from literature to philosophy and to ethnographic studies, from the history of religions to mythology and theology¹³. What is now called “Fondo Del Conte” includes a library, a book collection of about 7350 volumes, and an archive which is quite complex structurally and where all of Rosa Del Conte’s *carte d’auteur* (i.e. correspondence, documents, autographed volumes, handwritten and typewritten drafts of studies and translations etc.) are collected.

The archive containing the materials used for the preparation of this study was partially organised and systematised by Dr. Rizzi Bianchi and Dr. Dumbravă. P. Rizzi Bianchi created an inventory considered as a cultural fund, explaining its contents in detail. I must refer to this document in order to clarify the references present in the body of this study. The archive materials were organised “on three levels of use, corresponding to three types/typological situations”. The first organisational level (Archive 1) consists of “the correspondence and the documentary series”, namely documents, photographs and certificates. The second level (Archive 2) comprises “the organised cultural materials” not inventoried and partially arranged, plus the “intellectual products” of a different nature, divided into categories based on their contents: notes, notebooks, drafts, manuscripts and typewritten studies and translations. Finally, the third level (Archive 3) gathers the “minor study materials”, namely notes, programmes, preparation material characterised by a strong fragmentation¹⁴. The material I shall approach in the present study is thus part of the Book Collection and of Archives 2 and 3.

Del Conte-Quasimodo: A Controversy on the Translation of Poetry

Much of Rosa Del Conte’s academic training and career was related to translation, experienced from the position of a particularly attentive reader and a quite active translator¹⁵. As such, the archive holds an extensive bibliography and

¹³ Mattia Luigi Pozzi, “Viaggiare nell’archivio di Rosa Del Conte”, in Alvise Andreose, Angelo Bianchi, Giovanni Gobber, Paolo Gresti (eds.), *Romeno-Balcanica*, Atti del Convegno internazionale I Giornata di Studio “Rosa Del Conte”, Milano, Vita e Pensiero, 2018, pp. 149-162.

¹⁴ Piero Rizzi Bianchi, *Fondo culturale italo-rumeno della Professoressa Rosa Del Conte*, Milano, marzo 2016, the inventory is accessible online: http://opac.unicatt.it/search~S13*ita/cArchivio+Del+Conte+Rosa/carchivio+del+conte+rosa/-3%2C-1%2C0%2CE/frameset&FF=carchivio+del+conte+rosa&1%2C1%2C. Accessed June 21, 2021.

¹⁵ Some examples of volumes published by Rosa Del Conte: Rosa Del Conte, *Poeți italiani de azi: Eugenio Montale, Salvatore Quasimodo* [*Contemporary Italian Poets: Eugenio Montale, Salvatore*

various materials related to the subject of poetic translation.

I have therefore chosen to focus on a rather "striking" event in the intellectual-academic biography of Rosa Del Conte, namely the controversy related to poetry translation involving the poet Salvatore Quasimodo. In this context, the controversy surrounding the translation of Romanian poetry by the poet and Nobel winner Salvatore Quasimodo is a significant and rather revealing episode in the intellectual and academic biography of Rosa Del Conte¹⁶.

In 1966, the prominent Mondadori Publishing House published *Poesie* [*Poems*], a bilingual volume of more than 200 pages comprising a selection of poems by the celebrated Romanian author Tudor Arghezi, translated by Quasimodo¹⁷. According to Marco Dotti, who wrote "Per rompere il silenzio" ["Breaking the silence"]¹⁸, an afterword to the recent new edition of the volume, Quasimodo had worked on the translations from the beginning of the 1960s and finished them during a trip to Norway (1963).

The "hermeneutic" translation proposed by Quasimodo, who did not speak Romanian and worked on a literal rendition made by the journalist Dragos

Quasimodo], București, Tip. Bucovina I.E. Torouțiu, 1945; Elio Vittorini, *Oameni și neoameni – roman* [*Humans and Nonhumans. A Novel*]. Translated by Rosetta Del Conte, București, Editura de Stat, 1947; Tudor Arghezi, *Inno all'uomo*. Translated and commentary by Rosa Del Conte, Milano, Lerici Editore, 1967; Lucian Blaga, *Poesie (1919–1943)*. Translated and preface by Rosa del Conte, Milano, Lerici Editore, 1971; Lucian Blaga, *Mastro Manole*. Biographical note and translated by Rosa Del Conte, Roma, Tip. L. Morara, 1974; Tudor Arghezi, *Il borgo di cristallo*. Translated by Rosa Del Conte, Milano, Emme Edizioni, 1983 etc.

¹⁶ We shall not go into too much temporal-editorial-content details regarding the Del Conte-Quasimodo controversy, since Donatiello provided this information in the aforementioned study, as did Dotti in the 2004 publication. Broadly, the articles by Del Conte and Quasimodo that are part of this controversy are: Rosa Del Conte, "Tradurre è un'arte difficile", open letter to *Paese Sera Libri*, 1966, May 26, 144, p. 3; S. Quasimodo, "Due parole a una filologa", *Il Tempo*, 1966, July 6, p. 19, and Rosa Del Conte, "Le brutte infedeli ovvero Quasimodo interprete di Arghezi", *Belfagor*, 1966, 31 luglio, 4, pp. 471-482. As several scholars entered the debate, the controversy, in the newspapers, reached greater notoriety: Adrian Popa, "Il premio Nobel non sa il romeno...", *Il Borghese*, 1966, July 7, 27, p. 494; Perpessicius, "A proposito di una traduzione da Arghezi", *Cultura Neolatina*, XXVI, 1966, 2-3, pp. 277-281; Mircea Zăciu, "Glose: Argheziene", *Tribuna*, 10, 1966, 52, p. 3; Rodica Locusteanu, "Tudor Arghezi între Quasimodo și Rosa Del Conte" ["Tudor Arghezi between Quasimodo and Rosa Del Conte"], *Secolul 20*, 1973, 5, pp. 206-211; Mircea Popescu, "Un grande poeta tradito", *Persona*, 1966, July, pp. 18-19; Carlo Ferdinando Russo, "Il beotarca laureato", *Belfagor*, 1967, March 31, pp. 347-350; L. Valmarin, "'Cultura' rumena in Italia", *Il Tempo*, 1970, August 7, p. 201. This list of articles, while not meant to be exhaustive, provides an overview of the scope of the debate on these translations. To be thorough, we also point out that the controversy between Rosa Del Conte and Quasimodo opened in April 1966, when the Nobel Prize winner (April 29, in *Paese Sera*) replied to a note from Mr. Gianni Toti, in which Toti had stated that the translated poems were an adaptation of an Italian text made by Vianu.

¹⁷ Tudor Arghezi, *Poesie*. Translated by Salvatore Quasimodo, Milano, Mondadori, 1966.

¹⁸ Tudor Arghezi, *Poesie tradotte da Salvatore Quasimodo*. Edited by Marco Dotti, preface by Claudio Lolli, Viterbo, Stampa Alternativa, 2004.

Vrânceanu¹⁹, was built entirely on a “process of equivalence”²⁰ which aimed for re-poeticization, thus offering an interpreted reading of the Arghezian works. The apparent superficiality of the translations was criticised by several scholars, including Rosa Del Conte, a tenured professor teaching the Romanian Language Seminar at the Institute of Romance Philology of the University of Rome²¹.

The reaction and response to Mondadori’s Arghezian anthology was a letter entitled “Tradurre è un’arte difficile” [“Translating Is a Difficult Art”]²², published in the daily newspaper *Paese Sera* following a note by Gianni Toti. The theme around which professor Del Conte’s intervention revolves is the concept of *competence*, which is missing in the translations published by Mondadori. Additionally, she noticed (and pointed out) many “lexical and conceptual misunderstandings”²³ in the mentioned translation.

At the end of this letter, Rosa Del Conte writes: “I will account for these misunderstandings in a specialized journal, through an objective and documented critical examination of the results achieved. And not because I like to argue, but out of professional duty only”²⁴. Inevitably, the dialogue between the professor and the poet-translator quickly escalated to a public controversy, as Quasimodo replied to the piqued letter in the “Conversazioni con Quasimodo” [“Conversations with Quasimodo”] column of the newspaper *Il Tempo*. His was a brief and annoyed speech entitled “Due parole a una filologa” [“Two Words to a Philologist”]²⁵.

Examining del Conte’s dispute with Quasimodo, what emerges is a dichotomy between her translator and professor perspective, and that of the translator-poet. With the study “Le brutte infedeli ovvero Quasimodo interprete di Arghezi” announced and somewhat anticipated in “Tradurre è un’arte difficile”, Del Conte actually seeks an answer to a recurrent and seemingly unresolved question: what should poetic translation be faithful to? It is not uncommon to hear, as Mounin quotes, that “blind grammatical fidelity kills the text” or that “a mechanical fidelity

¹⁹ Adrian Popa, “Il premio Nobel”, p. 494.

²⁰ Marco Dotti, “Per rompere il silenzio”, in Tudor Arghezi, *Poesie*, p.142.

²¹ I am referring to Mircea Popescu’s article, also cited by Marco Dotti, “Un grande poeta tradito”, *Persona*, 1966, 7, pp. 18-19. From Del Conte’s perspective, the lack of professionalism shown by Quasimodo is even worse in the light of the fact that, after being contacted by Veronica Porumbacu, the professor had offered to help the poet, from the philological point of view, in the work of translation. S. Archivio 1 Del Conte, Busta 12, fasc. 1, letter from Rosa Del Conte to Quasimodo, 1960, March 3: “io Le sto a disposizione con quei sussidi filologici che possono soccorrere all’approfondimento dei valori non solo logici ma sopra tutto suggestivi, racchiusi nella parola poetica del testo originale”.

²² Rosa Del Conte, “Tradurre è un’arte difficile”.

²³ *Ibidem*: “travisamenti lessicali [...] e concettuali”.

²⁴ *Ibidem*: “Di essi (Di tali travisamenti) renderemo conto, in una rivista specializzata, attraverso un esame critico obiettivo e documentato dei risultati raggiunti. E non già per amore di polemica, ma per dovere professionale”.

²⁵ Salvatore Quasimodo, “Due parole a una filologa”, p. 19.

to style would lead to similar brilliance". It would appear that a balance between faithful translation and "free" translation has not yet been achieved; therefore, there is an ongoing dispute between "the professors obsessed with external, literal fidelity to all the formal linguistic elements of the text, and the artists preoccupied with a deeper, internal fidelity"²⁶. Without having written a work about translation herself, Rosa Del Conte entered the debate on translation fidelity and beauty. Although she does not offer a solution with the case study "Le brutte infedeli ovvero Quasimodo interprete di Arghezi", it is interesting to see how she positions herself in this line of theoretical discussions. Her different approach to translation is inevitably determined by a circumstantial factor. For the professors-philologists (of that time) the act of translation is intrinsically related to her didactic activity and, therefore, not merely responding to the need of making a text intelligible and appreciated from a critical and aesthetic viewpoint, as translation is subordinated to the need to explain the dynamics of the translational process²⁷.

In this intense "dialogue/exchange of ideas", Quasimodo places himself at the opposite end, accusing Rosa Del Conte of translating lyrics with "old-fashioned philological precision"²⁸ thus obtaining poor results. The accusation, further extended to the entire category of "professors", is that poetry, when translated, is replaced by an impeccable philological text which loses "the poetic quality of the original"²⁹. The constructed philological translation would therefore present itself as a "verbally faithful handbook, similar to a dictionary list"³⁰. If the translator-professor proposes translations considered to be mere transcriptions from one language to another, the poet-translator – not necessarily obtaining better results – aims for a poetic approximation by proposing a translation seen as an adaptation, an individual reading or even an equivalent substitute.

The entire controversy centred on the Arghezian translations, employed as a pretext for a discussion on theoretical approaches, is characterised by the use of sarcasm and irony. The discourse contains antiphrasis and semantic inversions and is based on the strategic employment of irony – a tool by means of which the debate is carried out.

It is therefore interesting to observe how the irony – which underlies this

²⁶ Georges Mounin, *Teoria e storia della traduzione*, Torino, Einaudi, 1965, pp. 141-143.

²⁷ Rosa Del Conte's classical formation makes her approach the text in this manner, perhaps because she unconsciously considers translation to be a tool bearing a propaedeutic character. Translation is not *fine a se stessa* [an end in itself] but rather it configures a means by which the text may become usable, emphasising its linguistic functioning, its philological perspective and its subordination to criticism.

²⁸ Salvatore Quasimodo, "Traducendo Arghezi", in Tudor Arghezi, *Poesie*, p. 18: "cronometrata precisione filologica". The editor of the volume notes that this contribution, whose title is purely editorial, constitutes the text of a unique interview.

²⁹ *Ibidem*: "la qualità poetica dell'originale".

³⁰ *Ibidem*: "manuale di fedeltà verbale, molto simile a un elenco di dizionario".

discussion – conceals in a certain sense a double nature: on the one hand a more or less kindly irony, on the other an ill-concealed seriousness in expressing one's opinions. From the "exchange" between Rosa Del Conte and Salvatore Quasimodo, starting from the significant use of the phrase "the unfaithful uglies", certainly emerges the polemical charge inherent in the antiphrasis³¹.

The "Unfaithful Uglies" or the Art of Translation

The synthetic essay "Le brutte infedeli ovvero Quasimodo interprete di Arghezi" shows that Rosa Del Conte, from a seemingly passive position of the reader, transforms the reading experience into a fruitful and conscious analysis endeavour. This makes her dismantle Quasimodo's translations and construct a critical essay containing, perhaps involuntarily, certain specific aspects of her own practice of translation and of the deontology required by the translator³².

As F. Donatiello noted, Rosa Del Conte criticises the "practice of poetic translation"³³ outrightly denying the opportunity of doing poetic translation in a style that differs from that of the original. The refusal of a translation model perceived as distant from the philological one stands out in the title around which the entire development of the critical discourse converges – and by which it is conditioned.

The expression "unfaithful uglies" inevitably leads to a conflict between literal translation and adaptation³⁴, and therefore to the binomial fidelity and beauty. The former represents the linguistic-semantic component while the latter stands for the aesthetic component. Rosa Del Conte does not deny the existing and necessary connection between linguistic fidelity (grammatical, lexical, expressive) and literary aesthetics (stylistic, musical). And yet, she considers the translator's poetic talent insufficient to concretely perform, during the translation process, the transition from linguistic operation to literary operation³⁵.

The "unfaithful uglies" is a sarcastic pun on the 17th century French view on

³¹ From the good-natured irony that characterises the closest personal relationships to the conflict expressed by the biting irony, many tones and nuances can be observed. Northrop Frye believes that it is precisely from combative irony that it is a natural ally of satire, so much so that it has assimilated them. See Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*, New York, Atheneum, 1967. See also Duncan McFarlane, "The Universal Literary Solvent: Northrop Frye and the Problem of Satire, 1942 to 1957", *ESC: English Studies in Canada*, 37, 2011, June, 2, pp. 153-172.

³² The antiphrasis to which we refer assumes a decisive role that illustrates the vision of reality and of translatology for Rosa Del Conte, it conveys the stylistic and lexical choices, and it establishes a particular communicative relationship with the reader (intended here mostly as an audience of specialists and colleagues) to which she addresses primarily to convey a deontological message of professional ethics.

³³ Rosa Del Conte, "Le brutte infedeli", p. 471: "pratica della traduzione poetica".

³⁴ Georges Mounin, "Teoria e storia della traduzione", p. 134.

³⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 139.

the expression *les belles infidèles* [the unfaithful beauties], translated and popularised in Italian as *le belle infedeli*, which commonly referred to those translations whose authors, in order to make their work as appealing as possible to the target audience, did not shy away from altering the form or even the content of the original text³⁶. It refers to an empty, purely aesthetic operation aiming to captivate the reader: a transposition closer to the welcoming culture, satisfying the public's taste and yet ignoring any principle of philological "faithfulness"³⁷. In a persistent exercise in rhetoric, Rosa Del Conte explains her own perspective; the antiphrastic view, implicit in the use of the expression "unfaithful uglies", is no longer disguised, thus intentionally underscoring the negative connotation of its criticism³⁸. Starting from the title, the stance taken by the Italian professor regarding these translations is clear and already anticipated in the article "Tradurre è un'arte difficile". The translation choices adopted by Quasimodo do alter the original text. In an attempt to obtain an aesthetically pleasing result, the translator has "debased, altered, misunderstood"³⁹ the poetic language of the artist, so much so as to make it insignificant⁴⁰.

In elaborating her own study, which was then published in the section "Noterelle e Schermaglie" in the *Belfagor* journal, Rosa Del Conte makes "echoic

³⁶ See Francesca Ervas, "Perché l'ironia riguarda il pensiero", *Esercizi Filosofici*, 2011, 6, p. 64.

³⁷ Bruno Osimo, *Manuale del traduttore: guida con glossario*, Milano, Hoepli, 2004, p. 188.

³⁸ Tommaso Russo Cardona, *Le peripezie dell'ironia. Sull'arte del rovesciamento discorsivo*, Sesto San Giovanni, Meltemi Editore, 2009, p. 144. This subtle and ironic play on words can be understood by an attentive reader. T. Russo Cardona writes: "La comprensione dell'ironia si fonda d'altronde sulla capacità di mobilitare conoscenze e correlare enunciati e assunzioni di sfondo, capacità essenziale anche per la negoziazione linguistica di un conflitto. Tanto nell'ironia quanto nel conflitto argomentativo c'è bisogno non solo di sapere che certe affermazioni presuppongono un certo sfondo di assunzioni, ma anche di controllare sino a che punto l'altro condivide questa nostra conoscenza" (p. 144).

³⁹ Rosa Del Conte, "Le brutte infedeli", p. 471: "avvilto, alterato, frainteso il linguaggio poetico dell'artista, fino all'insulsa lepidezza di un linguaggio poetico".

⁴⁰ From the *Standard Pragmatic Model* theorized by Grice (Paul Grice, "Logic and Conversation", *Syntax and Semantics*, 1975, 3, pp. 41-58) the interest in irony focused on the "contrast" inherent in the use of this rhetorical tool. The dissertation of the problem, whose conversational implications have been analysed, has favoured the birth of a theoretical line that includes a series of approaches defined as "two-stage", interested on the ironic phrase, on inference, typically opposite to the literal meaning, just as in the case of "unfaithful uglies". As Valerio Cori considers, only in a second time, the context takes on a more important role in determining the meaning of the ironic expression. Thanks to these approaches, defined as "one-stage", direct access to both meanings, literal and ironic, is therefore simplified. For a more in-depth analysis of the concept of irony, see the PhD thesis on verbal irony: Valerio Cori, *In che senso l'ironia dice il contrario? I vincoli cognitivi dell'ironia verbale*. Tesi di dottorato coordinata dal prof. Michele Corsi e dalle relatrici prof.sse Ivana Bianchi e Carla Canestrari, Università degli Studi di Macerata, Dipartimento di Scienze della Formazione, dei beni culturali e del turismo, Corso di dottorato di ricerca in Human Sciences, Ciclo XXIX, anno 2014-2016, p. II. With the development of the theories examined by Valerio Cori, the theme of contrast has gained more relevance, emphasising the social and pragmatic functions that verbal irony covers.

use” of the language: fully aware of the intellectual context in which both she and the public she addresses reside (the *common ground* they share), she uses the expression *belle infedeli/brutte infedeli* in a hermeneutic way⁴¹. In this sense, the phrase used by Rosa Del Conte, in which the author’s voice becomes the protagonist, can be read as an example of verbal irony⁴². Or, rather, considering the sarcasm inherent in the use of this phrase and in its explanation, it could be an example of sarcastic irony.

In this particular context, namely that of sarcastic irony, I must readdress the definition proposed by Valerio Cori: a form of negative irony imperatively meant to convey biting criticism. The object of irony is generally criticised in public⁴³.

How Poetry Is Translated: For a “Discontinuous” Theory of Translation

In what follows, I intend to point out the fundamental principles that guided Rosa Del Conte’s practice of translation, with particular emphasis on their application in the context of her Eminescian interpretative and translatable laboratory (from *Eminescu o dell’Assoluto* to *Poesie*). In this sense, the most illuminating are the three non-programmatic texts, “Le brutte infedeli ovvero Quasimodo interprete di Arghezi” (1966), *Pro-Memoria* [Memorandum]⁴⁴ (1967)

⁴¹ In his doctoral thesis, Valerio Cori explains that “essendo ironia e umorismo forme di comunicazione indiretta, l’interpretazione diversa da quella letterale può essere indotta da alcuni elementi (cues) e può servirsi di alcuni indizi (clues) che portano alla comprensione del significato indiretto. Secondo il modello pragmatico di Hirsch (2011), gli elementi che possono indurre ad interpretare una determinata espressione come ironica sono: la violazione palese di una delle massime del principio di cooperazione di Grice (1975), la presenza di una menzione ecoica (Sperber & Wilson, 1981), l’uso insincero di atti linguistici assertivi, commissivi, espressivi e direttivi (Haverkate, 1990), la presenza di una finzione (Clark & Gerrig, 1984)”. See Galia Hirsch, “Between Irony and Humor: A Pragmatic Model”, *Pragmatics & Cognition*, 19, 2011, 3, pp. 530-561, Paul Grice, “Logic and Conversation”, *Syntax and Semantics*, 1975, 3, pp. 41-58, Deirdre Wilson, Sperber Dan, “On Verbal Irony”, *Lingua*, 1992, 87, pp. 53-76, Herbert H. Clark, Richard Gerrig, “On the Pretense Theory of Irony”, *Journal of Experimental Psychology. General*, 1984, 113, pp. 121-126.

⁴² Verbal irony, also defined as linguistic irony, must not lead to the error of thinking that the ironic nature of an expression is to be found only in the words used. Any phrase can be used in an ironic way, based on the relationship with its referent. Significantly, already in 1990, Haverkate underlined two of the verbal irony characteristics: the intentionality and the fact that the interpretation of verbal irony is based on the knowledge shared by the sender and receiver about the commented situation. See Henk Haverkate, “A speech act analysis of irony”, *Journal of Pragmatics*, 14, 1990, 1, pp. 77-109, and Valerio Cori, *In che senso l’ironia dice il contrario? I vincoli cognitivi dell’ironia verbale*, <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/80203748.pdf>, p. 18. Accessed July 21, 2021.

⁴³ Valerio Cori, *In che senso l’ironia dice il contrario?*, p. 26.

⁴⁴ Rosa Del Conte, *Pro-memoria*, Roma, La Pergamena, 1967 http://opac.unicatt.it/search*ita/Y?SEARCH=rosa+del+conte+curriculum&SORT=D&searchscope=13 (code: Fondo Del Conte op-53). Accessed July 31, 2021.

and the "Premessa" ["Foreword"] to the volume *Poesie*⁴⁵ (1989).

These three texts – read like a "discontinuous" theory of translation – are structurally distant and were written for thoroughly different purposes. Rosa Del Conte's statements on translation do not form an explicit, coherent system, but are occasional externalizations caused by specific moments, as in the case of the controversy with Quasimodo, where I find perhaps their most extensive and complex formulation. If the controversy with Quasimodo constitutes – in short – a "construction", a tool meant to discredit the prototype of the poet-translator by using a specific example (the volume published by Mondadori), pointing out his shortcomings (the fact that the translator did not know Romanian, the Arghezian poetic and Romanian culture in general...), the "Promemoria" and the "Foreword" to the volume *Poesie* are, instead, completely different texts, aimed at highlighting the skills of a completely dedicated professor, a specialist and appraiser of the subject.

I must also underline that such typologically distinct texts were also drawn up at different and distant times. The discontinuity is not only in terms of structure and content, but also with respect to the timeline of the elaboration of a discourse on translation which is intrinsically fragmentary.

The first one, "Le brutte infedeli ovvero Quasimodo interprete di Arghezi" – as discussed above – is a harsh, sometimes ironic, point-by-point criticism of someone else's translations, while the second one, the "Memorandum", represents a crowning of the curriculum vitae compiled by Del Conte in 1967, telling "the story of a vocation and a passion"⁴⁶, as stated in the first paragraph. In short, this text briefly narrates the way in which Rosa Del Conte acquired and cultivated her skills. Probity and rectitude are the rightful basis of a career which – in her view – makes her more suitable for translating the Romanian poet's work. The key word in approaching this text is therefore competence, understood as the full ability to navigate a specific field. This, for Rosa Del Conte, can only be the result of study and dedication. In this text, written by R. Del Conte in response to academic requests and initially conceived as material to use on the occasion of institutional competitions, there are recurring expressions such as: *preparazione* [knowledge], *impegno* [diligence], *rigore* [accuracy], *lavoro solitario* [solitary work]⁴⁷. In this specific context, she writes about her commitment to a manner of translation featuring arduous adherence to the word and its melodic drafting: "The strong passion for a field of study [...] made me particularly sensitive to the seduction of the poetic word, engaging me not only in critical interpretations, but in an attentive

⁴⁵ More than thirty years after the exegetical volume dedicated to Eminescu's work, Del Conte published a volume of translations of his poetry, which constitutes the culmination of a decade-long philological work of *labor limae*: Mihai Eminescu, *Poesie*.

⁴⁶ Rosa Del Conte, *Pro-Memoria*, p. 1.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 2.

and – I hope – increasingly subtler translation effort”⁴⁸.

The “Premessa”, chronologically distant from the other two, is the introduction to her volume of Eminescian translations, on which she worked for more than thirty years⁴⁹. The anthology of Eminescian texts was ideally conceived as a complement to the monograph volume, and compiled starting from the early 1960s, when R. Del Conte thought of publishing the study on Eminescu in two volumes⁵⁰. In a supplementary worksheet on the editorial project, preserved in the Rosa Del Conte Archive, she wrote: “I took on the ambitious commitment of offering the world of Italian culture, which used to know (and it is unfortunately still true) only a small part of the lyrics published by Eminescu during his lifetime, a larger picture of this high form of poetry”⁵¹. Faithful to that commitment, Rosa Del Conte translates approximately 5000 verses, 74 pieces that fill 140 *cartelle* destined to become 160 with the planned introduction. The initial project – seen by several publishers, including Lerici Editore⁵² and Junimea⁵³ – takes shape on the occasion of Eminescu’s Centenary, due to the intervention of A. Răuța and the Fundación Cultural Rumana (Madrid)⁵⁴.

The “Premessa” (Rome, April 30, 1989) finally published in the volume proves to be much more concise than Del Conte’s original plans⁵⁵. However, in a few pages, the professor manages to condense her own ideas on translation both in terms of the working methodology adopted and in terms of her own anthological choices. Aware of the richness of connotations of the poetic word, Rosa Del Conte offers the readers an overview on the principles guiding her on a technical level: “I paid special attention to the melodic rhythm, following the musical cadence, which a translation in verse cannot discard, committing myself to reproducing, not to

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 7. “La forte passione per un campo di studi [...] mi rendeva particolarmente sensibile alla seduzione della parola poetica, impegnandomi non solo in interpretazioni critiche, ma in un attento e spero sempre più scaltrito sforzo di traduzione”.

⁴⁹ The existence of different versions of Del Conte’s Eminescian translations allows us not only to reconstruct the phylogeny of his translative work, but also to observe how and to what extent different translative choices are determined by the different purposes of the translation. While in *Eminescu o dell’Assoluto* her translations were subordinate to the critical discourse and to an obvious pedagogical function (see Rosa Del Conte, “Le brutte infedeli”, p. 482), in *Poesie* the translation becomes in itself the protagonist.

⁵⁰ Letters: Archivio 1 Del Conte, Busta 28p, fasc. 3, Mucchi Editore, 3/2/1962; Busta 21, fasc. 3, Mucchi Editore, 24/1/1962, 5/2/1962.

⁵¹ Archive 3, Eminescu material not systematized: “ho assunto l’ambizioso impegno di offrire al mondo della cultura italiana, che di Eminescu conosceva e purtroppo ancora conosce soltanto una parte delle liriche edite in vita, un quadro più vasto di quest’alta poesia”

⁵² The reference is to “Promemoria”, p. 7 and Archivio 2 Del Conte, Busta 18, fasc. 1.

⁵³ Archivio 1 Del Conte, Busta 20, fasc. 1, Irimia, 17/12/1988.

⁵⁴ Archivio 1 Del Conte, Busta 15, fasc. 4, Răuța and Archivio 1 Del Conte, Busta 24p, fasc. 1, Răuța.

⁵⁵ Archivio 1 Del Conte, Busta 15, fasc. 4, Răuța, 10/1/1989.

transposing, the metric structures of the original"⁵⁶. After having reassured the reader about the philological adherence to the original and the preservation of the melodic line, the professor also dwells on the reasons behind the selection of the texts, yet another example of balance as part of the translation enterprise: "it seemed appropriate to me that it [Eminescu's poetry] should be represented, albeit by 'samples', in the variety of its themes and according to the canons of aesthetic evaluation consecrated by the Romanian critical tradition"⁵⁷. Here, Rosa Del Conte also expresses her awareness that one's reading experience should be accompanied by a more articulated discourse. However, the *Premessa* seems rather significant in its content and quite coherent with the previous texts, which is a sign of a linear and conscious path of study and work.

An analysis on these three texts from a multifunctional perspective developed on several reading levels would let me extrapolate the essential standard of the professor's entire activity: a correct understanding of the text on a philological level, a re-construction of the creative, cultural and semantic context, and an identification of the interpretative plan while still following the structure.

In the first text, for instance, we find one of Del Conte's most elaborate formulation of her view on the role of the translator and of the multiple dimensions of the labour he/she is called to perform:

We thus maintain that a translator, before being a poet, must be satisfied, in the first phase of elaborating his work, with being – humbly – an interpreter: yet he must be so in the most thorough fashion, so as not to leave the word the slightest margin of uncertainty or of imperfection. He must know the precise and full value of each word, although not simply as it is outlined by the still indispensable lexicographical inquiries, but as it is deduced from that specific logical and emotional context, influenced not only by the syntactic structures of a language or its particular metaphorical usage, but also by the highly personal way in which a true poet takes on the various aspects of the language, arranging and moulding them under the impulse of his particular sentiment and under the mark of his culture. It is not insignificant that translating a poet should mean knowing not only the language in which he writes, but also the history of his human experiences and of his cultural encounters within the broader context of the civilization to which he belongs⁵⁸.

⁵⁶ Rosa Del Conte, "Premessa", p. VII: "mi sono preoccupata del ritmo melodico, nel rispetto di quella cadenza musicale, a cui non può rinunciare una traduzione in versi, impegnandomi a riprodurre, non a trasporre, le strutture metriche dell'originale".

⁵⁷ *Ibidem*, p. IX: "mi è parso opportuno che essa [la poesia di Eminescu] venisse rappresentata, sia pure per 'campioni', nella varietà dei suoi temi e secondo canoni di valutazione estetica consacrati dalla tradizione critica rumena".

⁵⁸ Rosa Del Conte, "Le brutte infedeli", p. 472: "Sosteniamo cioè che un traduttore, prima di essere un poeta, deve accontentarsi, nella prima fase di elaborazione del suo lavoro, di essere – modestamente – un interprete: ma lo deve essere in modo totale, senza lasciare alla parola il minimo margine di incertezza o di sbavatura. Egli deve conoscere l'esatto e totale valore del vocabolo – non quale si rileva dai pur indispensabili riscontri lessicografici – ma quale si deduce da quel determinato

According to Del Conte, the true accomplished translator must be, above all, an *interpreter* whose area of interest she broadens and deepens such as to ultimately encompass the whole intellectual and emotional world of the author and his place within his culture of origin.

Interpreting the Absolute: Translation in Rosa Del Conte's Eminescian Laboratory

With the “unfaithful uglies”, Rosa Del Conte actually highlights a contrast that by characteristics falls within what H. L. Colston and J. O'Brien define *contrast of type*⁵⁹. It is a type of contrast from which emerges different polarities: beautiful-ugly, good-bad, right-wrong. Far from being a compliment to a qualitatively beautiful translation, the expression “le brutte infedeli” is in fact an ironic comment which, by detecting a defect, brings out a contrast of polarity. However, Rosa Del Conte does not limit herself to underlining this aspect, but with this phrase she actually hyperbolizes what for her is a lack of professionalism and competence.

So, the best way to analyse Rosa Del Conte's practice and “theory” is, without any doubt, her Eminescian laboratory. From the latter emerged two of the professor's most known works: on the exegetical side, the highly praised monograph *Eminescu o dell'Assoluto*, which contains hundreds of translated verses; on the translative side, the substantial anthology of Eminescian poetry *Poesie*.

The different versions of the Eminescian translations are kept in Archive 2, in the boxes marked “Traduzioni Poetiche 1 Eminescu”, “Traduzioni Poetiche 2 Eminescu” and in the file marked “?” (subsequently identified by professor I. Bican) in the box marked “Traduzioni Poetiche 5 Altri”. In several envelopes currently found in Archive 3 there are also manuscript materials that have not yet been systematised (reading notes). Manuscripts and auxiliary materials are also preserved here: notes on the pieces, handwritten translation drafts, typewritten translations that have been manually corrected and annotated. The stratification of the rewritings highlights changes of mind and reassessments of her approach to form and content, also allowing the proposal of a first synthesis of the method used in the drafting, re-elaboration and completion of translations. Thus, the translation is presented *in fieri*, as an “evolving organism”⁶⁰. Consulting this material allowed

contesto logico ed emotivo, che non è condizionato solo dalle strutture sintattiche di una lingua o dalla sua particolare vis metaforica, ma dal modo tutto personale con cui un vero poeta assume i vari aspetti della lingua, atteggiandoli e plasmandoli sotto l'impulso del suo particolare sentimento e sotto l'impronta della sua cultura. Non per nulla tradurre un poeta dovrebbe significare conoscere non soltanto la lingua in cui egli scrive, ma la storia delle sue umane esperienze e dei suoi incontri culturali, nell'ambito più vasto della civiltà cui egli appartiene”.

⁵⁹ Herbert L. Colston, Jennifer O'Brien, “Contrast of Kind versus Contrast of Magnitude”, *The Pragmatic Accomplishments of Irony and Hyperbole*, 30, 2000, 2, pp. 179-199.

⁶⁰ Paola Italia, Giulia Raboni, *Che cos'è la filologia d'autore*, Carocci, Roma, 2016, p. 11.

me to formulate a hypothesis on a reconstruction of the translation process, from the initial approach to Eminescu's creative universe to the translated texts in their final form: the one published in the volume *Poesie*.

The translations published in 1989 must be placed in connection, on the one hand, with the intermediary versions and the alternative drafts preserved in the archive (dated, in most cases, to 1965, 1979), as well as, on the other hand, with the versions cited and translated in *Eminescu o dell'Assoluto* (1962), which, from a philological-genetic standpoint, may be regarded as the "preparatory material" for the decades-long gestation ultimately leading to the translations published in *Poesie*.

In the first volume, *Eminescu o dell'Assoluto*, translation plays the role of a necessity, determined by the limited knowledge of the Romanian language in Italy and, as such, by the need for the texts quoted in the monograph to be understood by students, philologists and critics to whom the essay *Eminescu o dell'Assoluto* was addressed. In the monograph, the translation also plays an essential role in depicting the critical elements and supporting the ideas expressed by the exegete. However, the second text, *Poesie*, occupies a diametrically opposite position: here translation is no longer a mere tool of understanding, nor is it a vassal of criticism. On the contrary, it actually becomes the protagonist. Therefore, there are two divergent and complementary dimensions which nevertheless allow the attentive contemporary reader to dynamically observe a translation process that lasted almost four decades, or perhaps even longer if we were to consider the unpublished "versions" preserved in Archive 2, in the file dated 2001.

Therefore, the translations made by Rosa Del Conte reveal themselves as an interesting layering of versions allowing, at least in the field of translation, the value and function of Contini's *scartafacci*. As such, the analysis of the different versions may lead to the elucidation not only of Rosa Del Conte's working methodology, i.e. the manner(s) in which she approached Eminescu's poems in order to translate them, but also – and especially – of the way(s) in which she applied her ideas about translation to her own practice as a translator. To test this working hypothesis, and as an example of such a method applied to the study of Rosa Del Conte's translative process, I will analyse the translative trajectory of her rendition of Eminescu's *Despărțire* [*Parting*]⁶¹.

Among the materials preserved in the Archive, a series of notebooks stand out. Each notebook preserved in Archive 2 is dedicated to a single poem and contains annotations regarding the poem, analysed on a metric and stylistic level, as well as regarding its content, along with several bibliographical notes and transcribed

⁶¹ This poem did not become part of the monographic volume at the time of its publication, as Del Conte had initially planned. However, we choose to use it as a case study, as we have a first draft of the translation certainly dated May 24, 1960, by the same author.

versions⁶².

In the notebook dedicated to the poem *Despărțire*, Rosa Del Conte briefly notes some information on the genesis, publication, and content of the poem. She pays attention to details, as she notes that *Despărțire* is the last piece in a larger group of poems and that it actually closes the series of “love messages” sent from Bucharest, on which the author worked for over a year and a half. According to Perpessicius, quoted by R. Del Conte “Perp. II 146”, this series would culminate in the publication of the lyric *O, mamă* [*Oh, mother*], written at the beginning of 1880⁶³.

In the analysis of this poem, Rosa Del Conte pays particular attention to creation and publication details: she reports that *Despărțire* was published in the October issue of *Convorbiri Literare* [*Literary Conversations*], and she is aware of the numerous changes undergone by the poem in previous years. Starting from the analysis of Perpessicius, she analyses the poem as an autobiographical document, its arduous elaboration reflecting the situational, emotional, and psychological changes in the poet’s life. In her notes, Rosa Del Conte refers to 1880 as the year of caesura in Eminescu’s biography and production. The professor defines 1880 as the great breakthrough year. To support this thesis, she once again quotes Perpessicius. She particularly refers to page 391 of volume 1 of the works in which the Romanian critic reproduced the letter that Veronica wrote to Eminescu, when she returned the letters and poems to the poet, including *Dorință* [*Desire*]⁶⁴. Rosa Del Conte points out that the corrections inserted by Eminescu in 1880 onto the manuscript of 1876 are highly interesting from a psychological point of view. Perpessicius notes that the verse *și în brațele-mi întinse. Să alerg* became *și cu brațele întinse să alerg*. The change is significant, since in 1876 Eminescu was waiting for V. Micle with open arms, while four years later she was waiting impatiently for him. In giving us this example, however, Perpessicius also warns the critic-reader against making excessive use of psychological interpretation, since beyond the biographical experiences, in Eminescu’s case the poet’s greatest concern is always of an aesthetic nature, one of permanent striving for perfection.

Starting from these premises, Rosa Del Conte decides to consult the 13 written

⁶² See Archivio 2 Del Conte, Traduzioni Poetiche 1 Eminescu, Quaderni.

⁶³ She wrote: “Ultima del gruppo di poesie stampate nel nr. di ottobre del 1879 di *Conv. Lit.* Conversazioni Letterarie chiude la serie dei messaggi d’amore inviati da Bucarest; la loro stampa durava da più di un anno e mezzo e doveva culminare nella lirica *O mamma* scritta all’inizio dell’anno successivo. Testuale Perp. II 146”, in Archivio 2, Traduzioni Poetiche 1, Quaderni, *Despărțire*.

⁶⁴ The volumes used by Rosa Del conte are: Mihai Eminescu, *Opere*, I. *Poezii tipărite în timpul vieții* [*Works, I. Poems Published during His Lifetime*]. Edited by Perpessicius, București, Fundația Regală pentru Literatură și Artă, 1939; Mihai Eminescu, *Opere*, II. *Poezii tipărite în timpul vieții: note și variante. De la Povestea codrului la Luceafărul* [*Works, II. Poems Published during His Lifetime: Notes and Variants. From The Tale of the Forest to Evening Star*]. Edited by Perpessicius, București, Fundația Regală pentru Literatură și Artă, 1943.

versions of the piece *Despărțire* elaborated by Eminescu between 1877 and 1879. In this case, again, she follows Perpessicius who, referring precisely to the troubled genesis of this poem, stated – we paraphrase – that it was only with this amount of effort that the poet was able to rise to the elegiac purity of the final version. Bogdan-Duică had previously addressed this topic in the article “Mihai și Veronica” published in *Buletinul M.E.*, III, 8, 1932.

Rosa Del Conte's first considerations are about the content of version A (2254, 108-109, y. 1877)⁶⁵. The professor analyses the themes treated in the various stanzas: the urging to forget the past, the awareness of the permanence of one's state of solitude, the funeral ritual. In the same year, 1877, Eminescu also wrote the versions B, 2254 and C 2283, which Del Conte examines in parallel. In particular, Rosa Del Conte focuses on line 45, which contains a recurring image in Eminescu, and on the interpretation of the term “pustiu” already used in the poem *Mortua est*:

B

O de aș pute' ca să mă mântui
De mine însumi ca să scap
De acel pustiu al vieții mele
De acel pustiu ce l-am în cap

C

O de-aș pute ca să mă mântui
Pe mine însumi să mă scap
De acel pustiu, ce-mi arde'n suflet
Și care-mi vâjje prin cap

The annotations of lines to detect similarities and differences alternate with roughly translated lines. In this case, Del Conte's attention is directed to understanding the meaning of the text, the function of the words used, in short, she is interested in the semantic levels of the text. For example, she writes down these lines that she will later use in the translation of the final version of the poem *Despărțire*:

B

Possa venire in mente ai preti di soffiare sul morto viso il tuo nome!
E poi faccian di me quel che vogliono: scagliato a un crocicchio,
lasciato in preda ai cani dilaniato loro il cuore (variante C) che lui stesso ha dilaniato
fino ad ora!

In addition to the rendering of a miserable and dramatic reality and an unhappy

⁶⁵ Rosa Del Conte also underlines the metric structure of this version (A) with alternating novenary and octonary lines and tetrastich lines ab ab. Regarding variant D (2308, 60-61), dated to approximately 1877–1878, she shows particular attention to the title *Cântecul unui mort* [A Dead Man's Song] instead, and underlines how this represents a fusion between the texts *Despărțire* and *De câte ori iubito* [Each Time, My Love]. Of this version there is a single line in the notebook, line 10, underlining the common dream, the sacred dream.

love, Del Conte's attention seems to focus on the sequences in which the theme of loneliness and mourning is a recurring one.

In observing the development of the text, Rosa Del Conte's intention is to highlight its evolution, as well as the relationships between the different versions. Therefore, for example, she focuses on highlighting the relationship between versions E 2261, 57-59 (1878), F 2259, 357-358 (1879), G, 2261, 64-65 (1879) and H 2279 (early 1879). In fact, after having noted the peculiar elements of each of these versions, she writes: "H 2279 is related to both E and F. (G1 and G2 being metric variations of F)". In the same way, she underlines the differences that occurred, for instance, in the case of version J 2260, 233-234 referring to which she notes: "The atmosphere of the church with the songs invoking rest has disappeared. Instead, there is a line that recalls the prayer of the dead"⁶⁶.

Rosa Del Conte reads the versions and transcribes them following a *chronological* criterion. However, she also goes so far as to observe their positions in the range of the Eminescian manuscripts. For example, with reference to text I 2277, 41 (1879), she notes that it is placed next to the poems *Ode în metru antic* (sketch) [*Ode in Ancient Meter*], *Freamăt de codru* [*Trembling in the Woods*], *Dalila* and a fragment of *Scrisoarea III* [*Third Letter*]. Likewise, she notes the position of the K and J versions, providing a clear image of the page by its description: "The last two known versions, K and L, are very close, perhaps from the same day. They sit next to the ugly letter of condolence that Eminescu will send to Veronica upon the death of her husband on August 6, 1789"⁶⁷. K 2279, 84-86 and L 2279, 93-94 were drawn up after August 10, 1879. Rosa Del Conte decides to copy – in parallel – these two versions, since together they represent the last draft preceding the definitive one which is of a new delicate K + L remelting.

Starting from the notebook sketches, I can first identify the importance of the evolutionary development of the text for Rosa Del Conte, as well as the importance of its reading. In fact, Rosa Del Conte argues that the text analysis and its translation must necessarily proceed from the text and done only in close relation with the latter⁶⁸. Finally, from these first pages, what emerges is the way in which Del Conte dwells on the word and then seeks a correct contextualization in the line, in the text, in the poetics of the author. Let us observe, for example, with reference to draft G, how she dwells on verses 19-20

⁶⁶ At the end of the notebook an entire page is dedicated to researching these connections. Del Conte underlines how the idea of the stranger already present in version A has been maintained, the image of the coffin of version B (*sicriu*) and versions B and C (*racla*), or the formula *mă 'ntunec* in D and E, while the poet ultimately rejected images linked to the semantic sphere of earth and dust. She also eliminates the evocative *pusti* that characterized verses 45-49 of versions B and C.

⁶⁷ Archivio 2, Quaderni: "Le ultime due versioni conosciute, K e L sono vicinissime, forse dello stesso giorno. Esse s'incontrano con la brutta della lettera di condoglianze che Eminescu manderà a Veronica per la morte del marito 6 agosto 1789".

⁶⁸ Rosa Del Conte, "Premessa", p. VIII.

De i-ar veni la preot ca de aiuri un gând
Să sufle lin de-asupra mea iubitu-ți nume sfânt

and – particularly – on *lin*, about which she writes: “observe that lin. Slowly, slow down: it is the aspiration of this distraught soul”⁶⁹. In short, Rosa Del Conte first offers a conscious, contextualized translation and only then an interpretation.

Del Conte's notes, albeit discontinuous, disorganized and often untidy, are extremely important both with respect to the understanding of the approach to the Eminescian texts and to the reading that Del Conte performs on the texts⁷⁰. As shown by the sharp attention she gives to the minutiae of the textual and intellectual genesis of the poem, of its formal aspects and of its psychological and emotional content, the act of translation for Rosa Del Conte has to do with the deepest acquaintance with the text and the complete mastery of all its facets. Consequently, translation itself is carried on simultaneously with an in-depth critical study of the text.

It is therefore interesting to notice how Rosa Del Conte views the relationship between the notebooks and the translations. Let's consider some lines published in the anthology *Poesie* (selection: vv. 30-38, *Despărțire*). From the lines noted in the notebook, Rosa Del Conte elaborates her own translation:

K

Tot îmi va fi mai bine ca'n ceasul de acum
Din zare depărtată să vie un stol de corbi
Rotind încet de asupra-mi să mi scoată ochii orbi
In erghelii sălbateci de cai gonind ca vântul
Să treacă pe deasupra-mi întunecând pământul
Tărâma m'or întoarce în sânul-astei țărâni
Dând pulberea-mi la vânturi și inima-mi la cârni
Iar tu rămâi în floare ca luna lui April
Cu ochii tăi cei umezi cu simbet de copil
Și tânără și dulce cum ești rămâi mereu,
Că nu mai ști de mine, că nu m'oiu ști nici eu

L

Tot ămi va fi mai bine...
Din zare depărtată **răsară** un stol de corbi
Să'ntunece tot cerul pe ochii mei orbi
Răsar'o vijelie din margini de pământ
Dând pulberea-mi țărâni și inima-mi în vânt

⁶⁹ Archivio 2, Quaderni: “osserva quel lin. Piano, far piano: è l'aspirazione di quest'anima sconvolta”.

⁷⁰ In 1960, while preparing the volume *Eminescu o dell'Assoluto*, Rosa Del Conte approaches the poem *Despărțire*. She does not have a personal copy of the Perpessicius Edition. It is in fact during the summers spent in the Alessandrina Library and during the time stolen from teaching that she succeeds in transcribing in full the texts that she consults, and which she then analyzes and translates.

Finisce così a 34 versi.

Final draft

Tot îmi va fi mai bine ca'n ceasul de acum.
Din zare depărtată răsar' un stol de corbi,
Să'ntunece tot cerul pe ochii mei orbi,
Răsar'o vijelie din margini de pământ,
Dând pulberea-mi țărâni și inima-mi **la** vânt...

Ci tu rămâi în floare ca luna lui April,
Cu ochii mari și umezi cu zâmbet de copil,
Din câte ești de copilă să'ntinerești mereu,
Și nu mai ști de mine, că nu m'oiu ști nici eu.

Rosa Del Conte works at length on the translation and filing of these two stanzas (vv. 30-38) which she initially translates:

First draft (box Traduzioni Poetiche 2)

tutto sarà assai meglio che non quest'ora amara.
Dal lontano orizzonte s'alzi uno stuol di corvi
ad oscurare il cielo sovra i miei ciechi occhi;
dagli estremi confini irrompendo una raffica
la terra dia alla terra, ed al vento il cuore.

E tu, restami in boccio come il fiorito Aprile
con i grandi occhi in pianto e il sorriso infantile,
~~e ognor più, de' verdi anni, novella sia la fronda~~
e del virgulto tenero più verde sia la fronda!
Ma a te, io sarò ignoto... m'ignorerò io stesso

Printed version

Sarà sempre assai meglio che non quest'ora amara.
Dal lontano orizzonte s'alzi uno stuol di corvi
ad oscurare il cielo sovra i miei ciechi occhi;
dagli estremi confini irrompendo, una raffica
al vento dia il mio cuore, e la terra alla terra.

E tu, restami in boccio come il fiorito Aprile,
con I grandi occhi umidi e il sorriso infantile,
e il tuo virgulto tenero sempre più rinverdisca.
Ma io... per te un ignoto, e ignoto anche a me stesso.

This first draft represents the first typewritten copy of the manuscript translation made by her⁷¹. These sheets still contain footnotes – a sign of her

⁷¹ Her translations themselves highlight the fact that, for Rosa Del Conte, translating implies a continually refined *labor limae*. In the case of *Despărțire*, the archive (box "Traduzioni Poetiche 2") contains the Romanian text on which she worked. On the page, at the top, Del Conte notes, as usual,

thorough nature. The footnotes depict other possible versions of lines 35 ("al vento dia il mio cuore, e la terra alla terra"), 37 ("e ~~dei~~ vieppiù de' verd'anni – novella sia la fronda!"), 38 ("Di me, (più) non saprai... non mi saprò io stesso"). A substantial series of annotations and changes in pencil are added to the footnotes and the text, both in terms of punctuation and of the solutions adopted in the text. Line 35 was initially translated as "la terra dia alla terra, ed al vento il mio cuore" turns into "tu dia il mio cuore, e la pena alla terra"⁷². Before that, in the notebook, Rosa Del Conte begins to work on the contrast between the image of crows and the radiant freshness of April, seeking, in the study of versions, a cadence and a rhythm capable of restoring the evocative power of the original. The professor is not interested in tracing the metrics of the original; hers is a search for meaning. Although she notices different rhythms and stanzas, she wants to convey the desolate sadness of this verse.

Returning to the example of lines 30-38, the drafts in the archive show the way in which the work phases on the translation are clearly outlined. In fact, the notebooks clearly show that there is a first moment of study of the original text, after which the professor sketches a translation in pen which is immediately typewritten. The first version of the typewritten translation is always accompanied by footnotes containing possible translations of entire lines. Subsequently, Del Conte proceeds with corrections in pencil and, where necessary, with further indications in pen. The first corrections, as we can already see in the example aforementioned, are replacement proposals which completely modify the structure and lexical choices in the lines, often the reflection of linguistic or content doubts that led to significant changes. Pencil corrections, however, are mainly lexical substitutions. A typical example is that of line 36. Eminescu associates the adjective *umezi* with the noun eyes. Initially, Del Conte translates it as *in pianto* [in tears]: however, later on she writes the word *lucenti* [shining] on the text, probably thinking about the appearance of those eyes, only to decide to remain closer to the

certain bibliographic data about the origins of the material and the year the poem has been written. The handwritten original of the translation has not been preserved, but we do have a typewritten copy. The first folder "Traduzioni Poetiche 1 Eminescu, EMINESCU, (cartella 11-31), [11]*" from the box "Traduzioni Poetiche 2 Eminescu" contains this version. The published version is instead in M. Eminescu, *Poesie*, pp. 43-45.

⁷² The text is filled with pencil notes – linguistic reconsiderations, semantic alternatives. Some are typewritten and written in the form of footnotes, as is the case of line 2 "solo te potrei chiedere se tu non fossi d'altri (a)" which in the note appears as "Se tu fossi ancor tu, te chiederei di darmi;". The footnotes are always a symptom of the initial processing stage of the translation. The pencil annotations substantially modify the text: "v3 non il fiore avvizzito della tua chioma," becomes "con non il fiore appassito", or "v 4 affidami all'oblio, di sol vo' pregarti" takes the form "questo sol ti prego", "v 21 Fra stranieri abbandonami, col volto alla parete" becomes "Lascia che le pupille mi si facciano di ghiaccio", or line 22 "mentre sotto le palpebre, la pupilla raggelasi" changes to "mentre sotto le palpebre, la pupilla si spegne" and further on into "reietto fra stranieri – il volto alla parete". The solutions proposed in pencil are adopted and incorporated into the text.

semantic area of wetness with *umidi* [damp]. However, the search for synonyms or equivalences also falls into the pattern of searching for a rhythm that follows that of the original text. Finally, the later versions of the translation only contain inversions and changes in the order of the constituents of the sentence, or changes in punctuation. In the case of the poem *Despărțire* [Parting], there are four different drafts, and I can propose a chronological realignment of these versions based on several particular aspects of Rosa Del Conte's working methodology. Compared to other translations, this is a philological case that can be easily reconstructed, with an extremely limited number of modifications and variations; however, it clearly exemplifies the methods of approaching the text and the translation methods adopted by Rosa Del Conte⁷³.

Conclusion

The present study, dedicated to the analysis of the world of ideas and concepts that lie beneath the expression "brutte infedeli", aims at reconstructing Rosa Del Conte's translation process, as well as her vision of fidelity to poetry. "Sensitive to the seduction of the poetic word"⁷⁴, Rosa Del Conte lived this experience in the name of her commitment to both "critical interpretations" and the "effort to translate"⁷⁵. As an ironic sentence, "brutte infedeli" can thus be read not only as a value judgement on the Arghezian translations made by Quasimodo, but, above all, as a synthetic expression of her view on the translation of poetry, as well as an aphorism in which she gathered and condensed, antiphrastically, her experience as a reader and as a translator.

Translated from Romanian by Anca Chiorean

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⁷³ Traduzioni Poetiche 1, cartella 4 (1965); Traduzioni Poetiche 1, Cartella 3 (1979); Traduzioni Poetiche 2 (1989).

⁷⁴ Rosa Del Conte, "Premessa", p. VII: "Sensibile alla seduzione della parola poetica".

⁷⁵ *Ibidem*.

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ROSA DEL CONTE'S "ART OF TRANSLATION" BETWEEN CRITICISM AND PRACTICE (Abstract)

In the synthetic essay "Le brutte infedeli ovvero Quasimodo interprete di Arghezi", Rosa Del Conte – eminent philologist, critic and translator – openly criticised the volume of selected poems by Tudor Arghezi translated by Quasimodo (1966). In the apparently passive position of the reader, Rosa Del Conte turns the reading experience into an analysis endeavour. She takes apart the Arghezian translations and constructs a critical essay where, in the background, we can notice certain specific aspects of her manner of translation and of the deontology needed by the translator. As part of a rhetorical exercise, Rosa Del Conte explains her own perspective. The antiphrastic reasoning implicit in the use of the syntagm "belle infedeli" intentionally emphasises the negative connotation of her critique. This ironic phrase, an explicit case of antiphrasis, could then be read not only as a value judgment on the Arghezian translations made by Quasimodo, but especially as a synthetic expression of her perspective on the poetic translation. The present study, dedicated to the analysis of the world of ideas and concepts behind the expression "le brutte infedeli", aims to reconstruct Rosa Del Conte's translation process, as well as her idea of "fedeltà alla poesia".

Keywords: Rosa Del Conte, Quasimodo, poetic translation, rhetorical irony, *le brutte infedeli*.

ARTA TRADUCERII LA ROSA DEL CONTE ÎNTRE CRITICĂ ȘI PRACTICĂ (Rezumat)

Eminent filolog, critic și traducător, Rosa Del Conte a criticat apariția volumului de traduceri argheziene realizate de Quasimodo în 1966 în eseu sintetic „Le brutte infedeli ovvero Quasimodo interprete di Arghezi”. Rosa Del Conte, în ipostaza aparent pasivă a cititorului, transformă experiența de lectură într-un traseu de analiză, ceea ce o determină să demonteze traducerile argheziene și să construiască un eseu critic în care să apară în fundal, poate, în mod involuntar, anumite aspecte specifice ale modului ei de traducere și a deontologiei necesare traducătorului. Într-un stăruitor exercițiu de retorică, Rosa Del Conte explică propria sa perspectivă. Concepția antifrastrică, implicită în utilizarea sintagmei „frumoaselor infidele”, subliniază intenționat conotația negativă a criticii sale. Sintagma ironică, antifrază explicită, „le brutte infedeli” poate atunci fi citită nu numai ca o judecată de valoare asupra traducerilor argheziene realizate de Quasimodo, dar, mai ales, ca o expresie sintetică a perspectivei ei asupra traducerii poeziei. Studiul de față, dedicat analizei lumii de idei și concepte care se află în spatele expresiei „le brutte infedeli”, își propune să reconstruiască procesul de traducere al Rosei Del Conte, dar și viziunea ei despre „fidelitatea față de poezie”.

Cuvinte-cheie: Rosa Del Conte, Quasimodo, traducere poetică, ironia retorică, *le brutte infedeli*.

MIRCEA A. DIACONU

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 cohort¹; 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 Mincu², 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”³.

¹ 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.

² Marin Mincu, *Ion Barbu. Eșeu despre textualizarea poetică* [*Ion Barbu. Essay about the Poetic Textualization*], București, Eminescu, 1981.

³ 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”⁴. 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 decline⁵.

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 coordinates⁶, 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. Vattimo⁷ 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.

⁴ *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”.

⁵ *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”.

⁶ See *Ibidem*.

⁷ 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"⁸.

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*]⁹, 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

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

⁹ 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 essence¹⁰.

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*

¹⁰ 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’ need¹¹.

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 act¹².

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 irony¹³.

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

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 46.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 186.

¹³ *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”¹⁴. 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”¹⁵. 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

¹⁴ 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”.

¹⁵ *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 contingency¹⁶. "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"¹⁷. 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

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

¹⁷ 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 burrows¹⁸: 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”¹⁹; 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

¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹⁹ 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*²⁰, 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 Boehme²¹.

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. Petrescu²².

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

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

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

²² 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 eminamente 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-Deleanu²³ (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"²⁴. Ulici obviously disavows what he sees as bookish excess. Later on, the study about Eminescu (which Ioana Em. Petrescu published in 1978)²⁵ 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"²⁶. *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

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

²⁴ 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".

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

²⁶ 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*]²⁷, 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”²⁸. 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 Iorgulescu²⁹.

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”³⁰. 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,

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

²⁸ 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”.

²⁹ *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”.

³⁰ *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"³¹. In the case of Florin Manolescu, referring to his first book, *Poezia criticilor* [*The Poetry of Critics*]³², 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"³³.

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"³⁴.

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"³⁵. 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

³¹ *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".

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

³³ 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".

³⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 473: "Criticul 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".

³⁵ *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-juridical 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”³⁶.

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 it³⁷.

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:

³⁶ *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”.

³⁷ *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 intelligence³⁸.

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"³⁹. 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 eye⁴⁰.

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,

³⁸ *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".

³⁹ *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".

⁴⁰ *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.”⁴¹ 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”⁴². 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”⁴³.

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 novel⁴⁴.

The critic focuses on what we could call the “critical imagination”⁴⁵. 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

⁴¹ *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”.

⁴² *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”.

⁴³ *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”.

⁴⁴ *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”.

⁴⁵ *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"⁴⁶. 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 1971⁴⁷, 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

⁴⁶ *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".

⁴⁷ 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 all⁴⁸.

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’”⁴⁹. 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

⁴⁸ 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 subliniate: 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”.

⁴⁹ *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"⁵⁰.
- 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.

⁵⁰ *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.

THE RECEPTION OF THE GENEVA SCHOOL OF LITERARY CRITICISM. THE IRONY OF JEAN STAROBINSKI IN THE ROMANIAN TRANSLATIONS

In 1993 a collection of texts by Jean Starobinski was published in Bucharest, compiled into a volume entitled *Melancolie, nostalgie, ironie* [*Melancholy, Nostalgia, Irony*], translated into Romanian by Angela Martin and prefaced by Mircea Martin. In a Romania fresh out of communism, this collection came in the wake of the propagation of certain theoretical ideas that shocked the scene of the Romanian discourse precisely by its abandonment of the conventions of literary theory at the time. In other words, Jean Starobinski's literary theory not only begins from the extra-literary field, but it also proposes an interdisciplinary approach to literature. Naturally, at a first level neither the approach nor the theme are remarkably innovative, but a brief foray into the 1970s facilitates the identification, in the fabric of Jean Starobinski's texts, of the register in which the critical convention occurs. The interdisciplinarity thus constructed consolidates a theory of thinking the critical act from its incipient form. Therefore, we are faced with a construction, on a macro level, of a lesson about text, about reading and literature (see *La relation critique*), and on a micro level (the one approached in the present paper), of a theorisation of a dialectical form of irony:

Our author is the first who is fully aware of the fact that he cannot achieve totality, he who subjects everything to the "ironic control of his reflection". The deliberate fragmentation that he cultivates in this area is not so much a form of melancholy as of irony, of melancholic irony. Incompletion and procrastination seem to be the existentially assumed signs of critical distance. In reality, they testify to the impossibility of maintaining this distance¹.

Moreover, irony understood in this way leads to reclaiming certain stances on

¹ Mircea Martin, "Cerneala ironică a melancoliei" ["The Ironic Ink of Melancholy"], in Jean Starobinski, *Melancolie, nostalgie, ironie* [*Melancholy, Nostalgia, Irony*]. Translated by Angela Martin, preface by Mircea Martin, București, Meridiane, 1993, p. XIV: "Autorul nostru e cel dintâi conștient că nu poate atinge totalitatea, el care supune totul 'controlului ironic al reflecției'. Fragmentarismul deliberat pe care îl cultivă în acest domeniu nu e atât o formă a melancoliei, cât a ironiei, a ironiei melancolice. Neterminarea, amânarea par să fie semne – angajate existențial – ale distanței critice. În realitate, ele mărturisesc despre imposibilitatea menținerii acestei distanțe". If not marked otherwise, all cited translations from Romanian were made by the translator of the present paper.

method and on the critical model. Precisely because Starobinski is connected to the two through critical reflection, he counterbalances a homogenous perspective on the text “to be read”, by weaving the psychological (and, therefore, biological) instrument into the act of reading. Thus, the critic (the literary critic in general) reacts to these readings: “Because of this, Starobinski was able to allow himself to react against the ‘methodological terrorism’ of literary criticism and to despise the terminological models. Compared to others’ facile enthusiasm or abuses, he always retained a certain ironic circumspection”². In the preface, Mircea Martin thus speaks of the theoretical convictions underlying the texts gathered in the aforementioned volume. These convictions are actually the main reasons why a dialectical approach to irony, for Starobinski, allows for the configuration of a distinction between postmodern irony and “melancholic irony”. In the preface, the Romanian critic emphasises the mechanisms of irony by transplanting the concept into the Romanian space and configuring the idea of concept translation in the literary criticism.

The present study thus begins from the above-mentioned collection of texts and proposes a reflection on the concept of irony in the critical works of Jean Starobinski, in order to investigate the way in which the relation between melancholy and irony responds to the critical commentary as a subversive act towards the text. The concept proposed by Mircea Martin, namely that of “melancholic irony”, actually refers to the interdependence established by Starobinski between the two, beginning from the pathological character of melancholy. As a doctor of medicine, with a thesis on the history and treatment of melancholy³, Jean Starobinski opened a new horizon in the study of literature by allowing it access to a psychology of the literary text. Thus, the course of the disease (a course built precisely for its treatment) and the types of melancholy defined by Starobinski led to its representation in art, philosophy and literature. If nostalgia, delirium and utopia are disease typologies, then imagination, intellectualism cultivated by art and literature, places irony at the opposite end of melancholy. The dialectic of the two is read, in the terms of the Genevese critic, as a post-Kierkegaard relation (irony being the reverse of melancholy) within the literary text. In the following, I shall attempt to determine to what extent this relation can be applied to an analysis that aims to highlight irony, and how the latter is defined / constructed in Starobinski’s view. The present study aims to exploit the way in which these essays were used by the Genevese author in order to present a history of the idea of irony from two complementary perspectives. The

² *Ibidem*, p. IX: “Din această cauză, Starobinski și a putut îngădui să reacționeze împotriva ‘terorismului metodologic’ din critica literară și să disprețuiască modele terminologice. Față de asemenea entuziasme facile ori abuzuri, el a păstrat mereu o anumită circumspecție ironică”.

³ Jean Starobinski, *Histoire du traitement de la mélancolie des origines à 1900*, the doctoral thesis appeared in Basel, Switzerland, 1960.

first, chronological, perspective concerns both the evolution of the concept for Starobinski in the broader context of his contributions to explaining melancholy and irony and in the historical context of European ideas, and the way in which the idea of translating the concept of history – by extrapolation, of any concept – influenced post-war Romanian criticism. Whether we consider the turn taken by Romanian criticism in the 1970s, with its autonomy of the aesthetic and (at least apparent) ideological independence, or the theoretical translations of foreign books as mechanisms for the implementation of certain passage channels for post-war literary studies⁴, a history of concept translation becomes part of the history of the Romanian literary ideas. The second perspective refers to the theoretical essence of the concept: on the one hand, the relation between melancholy and irony as it emerges from Starobinski's texts and, on the other hand, the particular nature of the concept in the essay "Cerneala melancoliei" ["The Ink of Melancholy"]⁵ in

⁴ I am referring here to what Adrian Marino called the "new Romanian criticism" beginning in the 1970s, repeatedly pointing out that the influence of the "Geneva school" represented the main engine for a new paradigm in our literary criticism. Moreover, Marino's interest in Starobinski's works is strongly linked to the way in which Romanian criticism understood that it must move beyond its journalistic phase; in this sense, his articles function almost like companion-texts for the translation projects of Starobinski's works started in 1968–1969. Thus, we must quote Adrian Marino in an explanatory article, "Jean Starobinski și istoria ideilor" ["Jean Starobinski and the History of Ideas"], published in *România literară*, 2, 1969, 51, p. 4: "Jean Starobinski theorises and professes a type of criticism and literary essay writing towards which our affinities also gravitate: a form that is oriented towards the classics in an aesthetic and ideologically historicised perspective, through unique readings, accomplished with a joint conjecture of methods. We openly sympathise with this type of integralism and spirit of synthesis, adherent to and at the same time selective of new methods (structuralism, form study, stylistics, psychoanalysis), to which the critic takes an understanding but lucid stance, which, for the time being, we shall merely mention: *Considerations sur l'état présent de la critique littéraire* (a lecture held at the Cini Foundation colloquium, *La critica forma caratteristica della civiltà moderna*, 6-7 September 1969, Venice). We shall not analyse the coincidences between a series of theses from the *Introduction* and the remarkable essay *La relation critique* (*Studi francesi*, 1967–1968), which already represents one of the reference texts for the current critical consciousness. A particularly useful discussion would be on another aspect of this form of critical thinking: the relation between criticism and the history of ideas." Original text: "Jean Starobinski teoretizează și profesează un gen de critică și eseistică literară, către care merg și afinitățile noastre: orinetață fundamental spre clasici în perspectivă estetică și ideologică istorizantă, prin lecturi inedite, realizate printr-un concurs solidar de metode. Simpatizăm deschis cu acest integralism și spirit de sinteză, aderent și în același timp selectiv față de noile metode (structuralism, studiu formal, stilistică, psihanaliză), față de care criticul ia o poziție înțelegătoare, dar și lucidă, pe care ne mărginim deocamdată doar să o amintim: *Considerations sur l'état présent de la critique littéraire* (comunicare la coloctiul Fundației Cini, *La critica forma caratteristica della civiltà moderna*, 6-27 septembrie 1969, Venezia. Nu vom analiza nici coincidențele dintre o serie de teze ale *Introducerii* și remarcabilul eseu: *La relation critique* (*Studi francesi*, 1967–1968) în care vedem, de pe acum, unul din textele de referință ale conștiinței critice actuale. Deosebit de util ni se pare a comenta un alt aspect al acestei gândiri critice: relația critică – istoria ideilor".

⁵ The text belongs to Jean Starobinski and is part of the collection of texts *Melancolie, nostalgie, ironie* [*Melancholy, Nostalgia, Irony*].

relation with Mircea Martin's essay, "Cerneala ironică a melancoliei" ["The Ironic Ink of Melancholy"]. Martin's paraphrase contains both the contextual explanations for the Romanian translation and the nuance of meaning for understanding the concept and, consequently, Starobinski's criticism itself:

The *literary* quality of the exegesis is not obtained by additional charms or by removing the texts, but by their adaptation and recreation as possessors of meaning, of "irremovable contingency". Criticism and literature share a need for meaning. Thus, the critical commentary must not be a demonstration, a plea, as the facts only need to be placed in a favourable light: "Facts do not need to be demonstrated. They need to be shown". A space is thus opened for discovery and creation. The test of vocation becomes indispensable to criticism. Starobinski has long been aware of this risk or of this chance: "as a comprehensive discourse about works, criticism cannot remain within the boundaries of verifiable knowledge; it must, in its turn, become an opus and it must face the risks of an opus".⁶

*Case Study: Jean Starobinski, "The Ink of Melancholy" and "Irony and Melancholy. Gozzi, Hoffmann, Kierkegaard"*⁷

This part represents a starting point for understanding the concept of melancholy and for highlighting its relation with irony. In fact, for the present demonstration, the chosen studies constitute the model that allows for the above-mentioned approaches. It is known that, for Starobinski, the theme of melancholy remains an almost obsessive one. Consequently, the theory of irony placed in a one-on-one relation with melancholy will always give way to the interrogation of the critical discourse. Thus, the demonstration allows me to emphasise not only the complexity of the theory of "melancholic irony", but also to explain the way in which, for the recent post-communist environment – by way of extrapolation – the essays gathered in this volume speak of a manner of reception and, in addition, of the influence on the local critical model. Here is how Starobinski ends the analysis on Hoffmann, a segment that is relevant to the present endeavour precisely because it concurrently speaks about a construction of the critical model and (alternatively) about a construction of a theory of irony:

If irony and melancholy are the two aspects of the same spiritual level, the remedy of the "inverted vision" or, in Kierkegaard's terms, the qualitative leap would have to be applied to both, but much more radically. Undoubtedly, one must go through irony (in the "romantic" sense) in order to become free from serious falsehood and philistinism. The irony would then have to surpass itself; the existential act of repentance would have to substitute the intellectual act of negation for settlement into

⁶ Mircea Martin, "Cerneala ironică a melancoliei", p. XIII.

⁷ The essays are part of the collection of texts translated and published in 1993.

a superior instance of humour and seriousness to take place. A point would thus be reached in which, under the gaze of humour, poetic irony itself would break down... The ironist is thus a man who risks losing his balance under the vertigo of the possible; however, he also holds an instrument of spiritual progress if he is able to point the sharp tip of negation against his own vane freedom⁸.

The Romanian Context

Alex Goldiș explains the affiliation of the critics of the '60s to the Genevese model (although he does not name it as such but rather attributes it to the French New Criticism) in the form of criticism that "does not confuse":

Georges Poulet, Jean Starobinski or Jean Rousset (with their precursors Marcel Raymond or Albert Beguin) postulated the immanence of literature without violently proclaiming its rupture from the subject. The focus on the subtle relations between consciousness and the work, the preference for *analytical criticism*, sensitive to the inflections of the text without slipping into the technicality of linguistics, the search for meaning in whatever the work hides (the passion for the hidden layers), are indeed renewing principles, but they do not disrupt the traditional manner of criticism. This is why they were almost unanimously shared by the '60s generation⁹.

The political context often provides answers at the key moment of a methodological influence. However, if, after World War II, the structuralist moment became predominant in the Romanian culture, what was "left aside" was the interlude that characterised it. I am referring here to the decade of the '70s. The important figures of our literary criticism, such as Adrian Marino, Ion Pop and Mircea Martin found alternative solutions regarding the structuralist model. A history of critical ideas thus constructed remains duty-bound to advocate the

⁸ Jean Starobinski, *Melancolie, nostalgie, ironie*, p. 130: "Dacă ironia și melancolia sînt cele două aspecte ale aceluiași nivel spiritual, va trebui să li se aplice amîndurora, în mod însă mai radical, remediul „viziunii inversate” sau, în termenii lui Kierkegaard, saltul calitativ. Fără îndoială, este nevoie să fi trecut prin ironie (în sens „romantic”) pentru a te elibera de falsul serios și de filistinism. Va trebui apoi ca ironia să ajungă ea însăși să se depășească; va trebui substituit actul existențial al cănței actului intelectual al negației în vederea instalării într-un umor și într-un serios superioare. Se va ajunge la punctul în care, sub privirea umorului, însăși ironia poetică va fi la pămînt... Ironistul e deci un om pe care vertijul posibilului riscă să-l facă să piardă echilibrul; dar el deține și un instrument de progres spiritual, dacă știe să îndrepte împotriva vanei sale libertăți vîrfurile ascuțite ale negației”.

⁹ Alex Goldiș, *Critica în tranșee. De la realismul socialist la autonomia esteticului* [*Criticism in the Trenches. From Socialist Realism to Aesthetic Autonomy*], București, Cartea Românească, 2011, p. 283: "Georges Poulet, Jean Starobinski sau Jean Rousset (cu precursorii Marcel Raymond sau Albert Beguin) postulau imanența literaturii fără a-i proclama cu violență ruptura față de subiect. Focalizarea asupra raporturilor subtile dintre conștiință și operă, preferința pentru o critică analitică, atentă la inflexiunile textului fără a aluneca în tehnicismul lingvisticii, căutarea semnificației în ceea ce opera ascunde (pasiunea pentru substrat), sunt principii înnoitoare, dar care nu bulversează maniera tradițională a criticii. De aceea, ele vor fi împărtășite aproape unanim de șaizeciști”.

reconstitution of the “forgotten” parts of the modern construction of literary criticism. Neither Marino’s modernity nor the aesthetic autonomy of literature, as seen by Ion Pop, and much less the literary criticism in the form practiced by Mircea Martin could have been useful without the Romanian ideological context of the ’60s-’70s, and without the direct access to a French-speaking Western environment in the case of the aforementioned critics. My aim was to unveil an *à côté* perspective on the construction of the literary criticism of the ’70s, one that would focus on the intellectual and, implicitly, contextual formation of these critics. Their journeys abroad and their dialogue with Western counterparts favoured the creation of a Romanian specificity regarding the autonomy of the aesthetic. Moreover, when the aims of the translator (who is also the established, competent critic in the Romanian space) overlap with the methods he/she employs in his/her own critical or theoretical discourse, we are dealing with a situation if not of *influence*, at least of conjuncture. The moment Romanian criticism enters structuralism is simultaneous with the rifts that open in the criticism of the aesthetic and of the autonomous value of the literary work, which can be explained by the “ideological thaw” of the ’60s. Access to the West, to western influence, is all the more disturbing since it would appear that the local critical space borrowed models and methods precisely in order to compensate for the setback caused by the political context. Therefore, the mosaic of the post-war Romanian critical environment is criss-crossed by influences and models that often become tangled:

However, flight from ideology remains a strong intellectual vector. As soon as socialist realism shows signs of lethargy, intellectual energy finds other forms of manifestation, different from the ones visible in the *mainstream* practice of the criticism of the ’60s. We could say that it was precisely the political climate of post-war Romania, with its oppressive ideology, followed by permissive strategies, including a degree of access to the West, that facilitated the acquisition of structuralism. This theory that is difficult to conceive – and to transplant – against the philosophical-cultural background of Romania in the ’30s, enters the communist climate with the complete aura of a scientific discourse that is (seemingly) pure and uncorrupted by ideology¹⁰.

It is indeed interesting to see how, mediated by a chain of friends and friendships, a discourse emerged – one that, at the time, represented the alternative

¹⁰ Adriana Stan, *Bastionul lingvistic. O istorie comparată a structuralismului în România* [*The Linguistic Bastion. A Comparative History of Structuralism in Romania*], București, Muzeul Literaturii Române, 2017, p. 35: “Cu toate acestea, fuga de ideologie rămâne un vector intelectual puternic. De îndată ce realismul socialist dă semne de amorțeală, el își găsește și alte forme de manifestare decât cele număidecât vizibile în practica *mainstream* a criticii șaizeciste. Se poate spune că tocmai climatul politic al României postbelice, cu o ideologizare forțată, urmată de strategii permissive, printre care deschiderea anumitor breșe spre Occident, face posibilă implantarea structuralismului. Căci această teorie, greu de conceput – și de transplantat – pe fundalul filozofico-cultural din România anilor ’30, se încarcă în climatul comunist cu întreaga aură a unui discurs științific (aparent) pur și nevirusat de ideologie”.

model for a means of constructing the relation between the literary critic and the text under scrutiny. The situation is much more clearly contextualised in the prefaces signed by the Romanian authors. Thus, Ion Pop, Mircea Martin, Angela Martin, Alexandru George or Romul Munteanu, among the translators of the texts, became their mediators by explaining, on the one hand, their personal choices and, on the other hand, the situations effected by these texts in the Eastern European cultural climate of communist Romania. However, if we were to consider that the *close reading* method runs against certain aesthetic and political issues facing the Romanian society of that period, these studies support identity hypotheses. The present paper does not aim to exhaustively scan the theoretical imagination of the Genevese critics. We believe that the chosen subject carries a novelty meant to draw attention to the translatable nature of the concepts of criticism and literary theory to the extent that it meets certain requirements for the reception of these translations in the Romanian space. The free movement of the western model is the reason for interrogating the two contexts: the Romanian and the Genevese. For this reason, a much more important aspect is a focus on the entire critical and theoretical climate that the Romanian space imports and translates, for the most part (not in the substantial sense of the actual translation of texts – there was a relatively small number of translations as opposed to the number of the original texts – but rather in the sense of the import model; there were quite discreet moments during the '70s in which certain mutations were actually explained; the texts that accompanied the translations were often either few or insufficiently compact, relying on impressions and personal admiration). Therefore, the Eastern European context that placed Romania on the map of cultural and political imbalances refers to the interrogation of the reception of the “Geneva school of literary criticism” within the aforementioned grid.

The interest in Jean Starobinski's research was exploited in the works of authors such as Carmelo Colangelo, whose monograph (translated in Romanian by Ioana Bot) generates the image of a critic of French expression who identifies and interrogates the points of reflection of the Starobinskian thought. Colangelo's book, *Jean Starobinski sau ucenicia privirii*¹¹ [*Jean Starobinski ou l'apprentissage du regard*] raises the issue of the “meaning of the reflection”, beginning from the relation between man and self, and between man and the world. The meaning referred to by Colangelo (and, implicitly, by Starobinski) is that of the rational assumption, of placing reason within the field of the hermeneutic process, consciously integrating it into reflection. The ethical act must not distance itself from the critical act. The translator of the monograph speaks of the work's

¹¹ Carmelo Colangelo, *Jean Starobinski sau ucenicia privirii*. Translation and edition by Ioana Bot, Cluj-Napoca, Limes, 2006. See Carmelo Colangelo, *Jean Starobinski ou l'apprentissage du regard*, Genève, Editions Zoé – Fondation Pittard de l'Andelyn, 2004.

importance and the importance of Starobinski's criticism in the Romanian cultural space, highlighting its role in understanding the construction of "our post-war literary ideology". In this context, the Romanian translations, issued relatively soon after the works' publication in French, become important as they interrogate the way in which the Romanian post-war society explains (itself) given the confirmation of the existence of a survival mechanism defined in the area of literature and literary studies of the period following the structuralist fashion still in effect.

Although all the translators of the books claim to follow the Genevese school of thought (and one must not overlook the fact that they are the well-known names of our literary criticism), and despite this declared affinity, the model of the Romanian authors' books either loses the reading and critical practice of the Swiss counterpart or contemplates the established model with extreme admiration. In both situations, however, there is a major interest in adopting foreign books and in maintaining a dialogue between the two cultures. The case of Ion Pop-Jean Starobinski (I am referring here to their friendship and to the relationship implied by the translation) is one example of a complex exercise of popularisation in Romanian post-war criticism of a reading model that privileges *le regard surplombant* (the gaze). Naturally, when Ion Pop offers the contextual explanations of the text's reception, he also constructs a reading grid that is placed on the extremely fine borderline between subjective choice and scientific rigor:

In all cases, "the critical relationship" is defined, for Starobinski, by an extreme mobility of the gaze, by successively close and remote stances, through forays and round turns to get to the most complete understanding of the *text* placed within its *context*, considered in the extended framework of its intertextual relations. [...] Perhaps to the highest degree, he is the one that contributes the corrective "distant reflection", the free confrontation with the text, the latter being a space for the affirmation of the originality of the critical discourse¹².

As a concept translation, the transfer that takes place with the Romanian translations of Jean Starobinski's thinking, and implicitly that of the Genevese school, into the Romanian cultural, social and political space, is based on the need of our post-war society to receive European cultural models in order to import them afterwards. Thus, the apparently simple process of import by translation corresponds to an identity issue present in the environment of our national culture. The Romanian translations of Jean Starobinski's books were published around

¹² Ion Pop, *Ore franceze [French Classes]*, București, Univers, 1979, p. 320: "În toate cazurile 'relația critică' se definește pentru Starobinski printr-o extremă mobilitate a privirii, prin apropieri și distanțări succesive, prin incursiuni și întoarceri pe drumul parcurs spre înțelegerea cât mai deplină a *textului*, plasat în *contextul* său, judecat în cadrul extins al relațiilor intertextuale. [...] el îi aduce, poate în gradul cel mai înalt, corectivul 'reflecției distante', al confruntării libere cu textul, spațiu, acesta din urmă, al afirmării originalității discursului critic".

1974. Later, in 1985, Ion Pop signed the translation and the preface to *Textul și interpretul* [*The Text and the interpreter*] and motivated the necessity of receiving this model not so much in the terms of the Romanian post-war culture, as in terms that were much more autonomous in relation with Starobinski's theory itself. Ion Pop calls it the influence of the "ex-centric", referring to Geneva's status as an alternative centre of the francophone critical discourse, as opposed to Paris. Here, the Romanian critic's affinity is all the more obvious as the autonomy of the aesthetic becomes a form of subversiveness of any form of ideology. The transplant of Starobinski's model is all the more relevant in this respect:

Freer in relation to the structure, the book that – with the author's consent – I placed under the title of a programmatic essay, *The Text and the Interpreter*, could offer a moving image of the interpretative act as it takes shape for a critic who understands that he needs to continuously amplify the reading systems provided by contemporary literary and scientific research, exploiting them with the skill of a perfect connoisseur, as well as with the detachment of a free, creative consciousness¹³.

The entire discussion about the method is focused on two coordinates: one related to the "national" view of literary criticism, which is actually represented by the innovative character of the "Geneva School of Literary Criticism" as opposed to the structuralist model or the model of the French "New Criticism", and the second located in the area of the fortuitous circumstances that, during the post-war years in Romania, facilitated the dialogue with a western culture that was less politically centred. This inclination towards the western alternative model (the Genevese one) decisively contributes to the formation of a class of followers (loyal translators and readers) who understood the model of Jean Starobinski's criticism (as well as that of the other representatives: Marcel Raymond, Jean-Pierre Richard, Jean Rousset, Albert Béguin, Georges Poulet) as an alternative means of approaching the literary text, thus rejecting the structuralist method implicitly, if not declaratively.

From the "Geneva School of Literary Criticism" to a Romanian Network of Translators

When discussing the current state of literary criticism, Romul Munteanu – one of the translators of the critics of the "Geneva school" – explains Jean

¹³ Ion Pop, "Jean Starobinski și mobilitatea privirii critice" ["Jean Starobinski and the Mobility of the Critical Gaze"], in Jean Starobinski, *Textul și interpretul* [*The Text and the Interpreter*]. Translation and preface by Ion Pop, București, Univers, 1985, p. 26: "Mai liberă sub raportul structurii, cartea pe care – cu acordul autorului – am așezat-o sub titlul unui eseu programatic, *Textul și interpretul*, poate oferi însă o imagine în mișcare a actului interpretativ, așa cum se concretizează el la un critic ce înțelege să-și amplifice mereu sistemele de lectură puse la dispoziție de cercetarea literară și științifică contemporană, exploatându-le cu pricepere de perfect cunoscător, dar și cu detașarea unei conștiințe libere, creatoare".

Starobinski's method by referring not to the source text, but to the Romanian translation. Thus, there are two directions: on the one hand, the author supports the mediator role played by the literary critic and, on the other hand, he uses, within his own discourse, a form of assuming the adherence to the model he follows – the Genevese one:

The critic is, in our opinion, a *mediator*, not a *creator* of autonomous universes. [...] In this context, the *criticism of criticism* is a periodic examination of the validity of the tools used, of their change in time, of their ability to subscribe to a mobile present, ready to flow into the future. To a much greater extent than in other circumstances, the critical approach exercised on an object that gets so rapidly obsolete, such as criticism, is carried out in the name of principles belonging to the present. Therefore, if one can speak of a certain diachronic dimension of the trajectory, it is configured only by an act of reception that irradiates from the present to the past¹⁴.

Regarding the discussions in cultural magazines, the most frequent occurrence of Jean Starobinski's reception – whether in connection with the translated fragments or the interviews and chronicles – was during the post-war period in *România literară*, beginning with 1972. Thus, until the fall of communism, the magazine issued by the Writers Union – which makes it a cultural magazine of the highest level, thus an “official” magazine – published articles about what could already be regarded as the newest events on the scene of foreign influences in literary criticism. The chronicles authored by Cristian Unteanu or Doina Uricariu (which are only two names that accompanied the reception of the translations at that time) construct a relatively open panorama of the reception of Starobinski's books, even though they failed to include a contextual explanation or, in other words, to argue for the novelty of the model that infiltrated the cultural sphere at that time. Moreover, the comments were often reduced to the way in which the Romanian representatives resonated with the new theoretical climate. Doina Uricariu even spoke of the balance offered by the Genevese direction to the young philologists (Ion Pop, Romul Munteanu, Al. George et al.), for whom the foreign context represents not only a means to resonate with a mature and autonomous critical thinking, but also the expression of a subversive act, given the personal choice of this model:

¹⁴ Romul Munteanu, *Metamorfozele criticii europene moderne* [*The Metamorphoses of the Modern European Criticism*], București, Editura Pro Humanitate, 1998, pp. 10-11: “Criticul este, după părerea noastră, un *mediator*, nu un *creator* de universuri autonome. [...] În acest context, *critica criticii* este un examen periodic al validității instrumentelor utilizate, al devenirii lor în timp, al capacității lor de înscriere într-un prezent mobil, gata să se reverse în viitor. Într-o măsură mult mai mare decât în alte împrejurări, demersul critic exercitat asupra unui obiect care se perimează atât de repede, cum este critica, se realizează în numele unor principii care aparțin prezentului. De aceea, dacă se poate vorbi de o anumită dimensiune diacronică a traiectului, ea se configurează numai printr-un act de receptare care iradiază din prezent spre trecut”.

In 1974, when Jean Starobinski's volume *Relația critică* [*The Critical Relationship*] was published in Romania as translated by Al. George, an entire generation of young people licensed in philology and confronted with the arcana of several methodological values, felt the beneficial effect of a calm liberation by discovering in the Genevese professor's writings an authentic anti-dogmatism, grafted on the older myth of transparency. Starobinski offered us the much-desired balance after so many lessons in the exclusiveness abundant in the innovative spirit, which is doomed to be stubborn and rigid even at the moment of its utmost openness¹⁵.

In 1972 and 1974, Cristian Unteanu also signed a series of articles in *România literară* along the same lines, recording the moments of publication¹⁶. Moreover, on the 150th anniversary of Benjamin Constant's birth, at the International Congress in Lausanne in July 1980, Henri Zalis also noted in *România literară* that the integration of his Romanian colleagues into the group of foreign participants, especially the meeting with Jean Starobinski, would configure a bond based not only on an intellectual admiration, but also on the understanding that this way of thinking adopted in the Romanian space would indicate a strong sense of belonging to a European school of thought:

I was delighted that Jean Starobinski, the well-known Genevese critic, had warm words regarding our Romanian colleagues – George Ivașcu, Adrian Marino, N. Tertulian. [...] I had the honour of being invited by Jean Starobinski to his home in Geneva. I was welcomed by a writer and a researcher preoccupied by the motivations inside a work [...] Starobinski, whose name was linked to solid works, but also to the *Rencontres internationales de Genève*, seems to naturally complement the Swiss spirit, since he adds a dose of Sorbonne-type erudition to a state of lucidity¹⁷.

¹⁵ Doina Uricariu, "O lume într-o lume mai mare" ["A World in a Greater World"], *România literară*, 19, 1986, 32, p. 20: "În 1974, când s-a tipărit la noi volumul lui Jean Starobinski *Relația critică*, tradus în românește de Al. George, o întreagă generație de tineri licențiați în filologie, confrunțați cu arcele mai multor valori metodologice, trăia sentimentul benefic al unei calme eliberări, descoperind în scrisul profesorului genevez un antidogmatism autentic, altoit pe mai vechiul mit al transparenței. Starobinski ne oferea acel echilibru mult rîvnit după atîtea lecții ale exclusivismului de care nu e lipsit spiritul novator, osîndit să fie încăpățînat și rigid în chiar ceasul maximei lui deschideri".

¹⁶ See Cristian Unteanu, "Jean Starobinski, 'Les mots sous les mots'", *România literară*, 5, 1972, 29, p. 13; Cristian Unteanu, "Jean Starobinski, 'Emblemele rațiunii'" ["Jean Starobinski, 'Emblems of Reason'"], *România literară*, 7, 1974, 15, p. 20; Cristian Unteanu, "Jean Starobinski, 'Relația critică'" ["Jean Starobinski, 'The Critical Relation'"], *România literară*, 7, 1974, 43, p. 20.

¹⁷ H. Zalis, "Moment helvet" ["Helvetic Moment"], *România literară*, 13, 1980, 32, p. 21: "M-a bucurat mult faptul că Jean Starobinski, cunoscutul critic genevez, a avut cuvinte calde la adresa colegilor de breaslă români – George Ivașcu, Adrian Marino, N. Tertulian. [...] Am avut cîntea să fiu invitat de Jean Starobinski la el acasă, la Geneva. M-a întâmpinat un scriitor și cercetător preocupat dinăuntru de motivațiile operei. [...] Starobinski, care și-a legat numele de lucrări solide dar și de acele *Rencontres internationales de Genève*, pare în chip natural complementul spiritului elvețian, întrucît aduce la starea de luciditate o doză de erudiție de tip sorbonard".

Many of the records published in the cultural magazines regarding the Genevese subject, refer to the group that had unmediated access not only to meeting a free European culture, but also to the atmosphere of a dialogue that seems, from the very beginning, to build a network inside the environment of the Romanian post-war criticism. The 2004 issues of *Secolul 21* are dedicated completely to Swiss culture; they contain three articles signed by Jean Starobinski and translated by Alina Ledeanu, which confirms the attempt to continue maintaining the model in the post-communist cultural magazines. Following what we have identified as a subversive act against the official discourse (the import of a model that, as we have seen, represents a passage route for the Romanian cultural space), the references with which the critical language juggles in journalism remained strongly anchored in the criticism of the '60s generation.

Moreover, adding a discussion about translations and translators to the present context has not only collateral value, as cultural capital transfers from one culture to another, but also provides the data that contributes to the crystallisation of a western atmosphere. A companion-text is part of Starobinski's *Gesturile fundamentale ale criticii* [*The Fundamental Gestures of Criticism*] (2014), translated and prefaced by Angela Martin, with a foreword by Mircea Martin. What the translator notes is that the central theme of Starobinski's "critical programme" is connected to the idea according to which the values of literature are curative and strongly anchored into consciousness. The essay that accompanies the translation, however, speaks of the contemporary world's need to explain the social and political phenomena of a society through what Mircea Martin calls the "anticipatory... opus":

His work remained valid because it was, time and time again, anticipatory. Hans Robert Jauss noted as early as 1985 that Starobinski "anticipated the future centres of interest of the modern methods: the archaeology of science, the critique of ideologies, psychohistory, the history of lifestyles, the history of concepts, historical semantics and even semiotics". [...] we could say that his volumes, with their topic diversity and the originality of their viewpoints, are the ones that defied – and continue to defy today – the developments around them: not through noisy and aggressive attitudes, not through spectacular radicalisms, but through their very consistency immune to fashion, through their calm and serene naivety, through the implicit ethics of writing and of intellectual engagement¹⁸.

¹⁸ Mircea Martin, "Cuvânt înainte" ["Foreword"], in Jean Starobinski, *Gesturile fundamentale ale criticii* [The fundamental gestures of criticism]. Translation and preface by Angela Martin, București, Art, 2014, pp. 8-9: "Opera lui a rămas validă, valabilă și pentru că a fost, nu odată, anticipatoare. Hans Robert Jauss observa încă în 1985 că Starobinski 'a anticipat centrele viitoare de interes ale metodelor moderne: arheologia științei, critica ideologiilor, psihoistoria, istoria stilurilor de viață, istoria conceptelor, semantica istorică și chiar semiotica'. [...] am putea spune că volumele sale, cu diversitatea lor tematică și cu originalitatea punctelor de vedere avansate, sunt cele care au sfidat – și continuă să sfideze și astăzi –

In fact, Mircea Martin contextualises the works of Jean Starobinski not only in the Romanian space, but in the Eastern European space implicitly, precisely because the explanation of an anticipatory work contributes to a history of the critical ideas that are continuously part of a dialogue with the ways in which it is achieved. Moreover, this happens in the context in which the model import – and the import of critical thinking – takes place by dispersing and translating texts, which once again validates the fact that the time of the communist regime in Romania was strongly marked by tacit stances taken by the young critics whose personal convictions joined those of their Genevese colleagues. Hence, the hypothesis that critical and conceptual discourse as theorised and practiced by Jean Starobinski is connected to the relation between the generation of critics already consecrated in the '70s and the francophone context. The entire climate requires a two-level dialogue: an internal one, connected to the national network of our post-war literary criticism, and an external one, connected to the points in which the network was consolidated based on the nodes implied by the “Geneva school”-type of foreign influence. The issue raised by Alex Goldiș in this sense (namely that of influence) interrogates the way in which the characteristics of the cultural and critical atmosphere in Romania in the '70s are shaped:

The problem is that, while the representatives of the “Geneva School of Literary Criticism” accepted the pact – at least temporarily or partially – with stylistics, with linguistics or even with the historical excursion –, the Romanian critic isolates himself completely in the present of the work and, even more than in the present of the work, in the present of the “creative figure”. What he is truly interested in is not the writing, the text itself, but rather the intimate structure hidden by it¹⁹.

The way in which the contemporary Romanian critic describes the relation between the Genevese school, and the reality of Romanian criticism compensates for a system reading of the models that become established in the Romanian post-war space. Thus, we could say that Jean Starobinski's model and method can be used to identify a pattern in the Romanian literary criticism which is built in complete dialogue with and with complete popularisation of a western context that can be defined in terms of a subversive act – where subversiveness must be understood as an instrument of following an alternative model.

Thus, the aim of explaining this translation phenomenon was to exemplify, by

evoluțiile din jur: nu prin atitudini zgomotoase și agresive, nu prin radicalisme spectaculoase, ci prin însăși consistența lor indiferentă la mode, prin naivitatea lor calmă și senină, printr-o etică implicită a scrisului și a angajamentului intelectual”.

¹⁹ Alex Goldiș, *Critica în tranșee*, p. 41: “Numai că, dacă reprezentanții ‘Școlii de la Geneva’ acceptau pactul – măcar temporar și parțial – cu stilistica, cu lingvistica, sau chiar cu excursul istoric –, criticul român se izolează complet în prezentul operei. Și mai mult decât al operei, în prezentul ‘figurii creatoare’. Căci ceea ce-l interesează nu e scriitura, textul propriu-zis, ci mai degrabă structura intimă pe care acesta o ascunde”.

means of the concept of irony as it appears in Jean Starobinski's works, a model of the circulation of western critical ideas to post-war Romania. Therefore, the entire group of texts translated into the Romanian language consolidates the development (the history) of the concept of irony as defined by the Genevese author and a reading model for both the literary and the critical text. What is of interest is precisely the dialogue with the literary text and its connection with a history of literary ideas. The presentation of the Romanian context contributes to the pertinent formulation of the following thesis: the import into Romanian literary criticism, through the translations of the Geneva school texts, occurs both at the level of the method and at the level of the model.

Translated from Romanian by Anca Chiorean.

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THE RECEPTION OF THE GENEVA SCHOOL OF LITERARY CRITICISM. THE IRONY OF JEAN STAROBINSKI IN THE ROMANIAN TRANSLATIONS (Abstract)

Considering that the "official" literary studies discourse of the post-war era in Romania was shaped by Structuralism, I would emphasize the fact that Geneva School of Literary Criticism's main theoretical directions, coming from the Francophone area, as a recursion to French language contexts, not from Paris this time (as was the case in 19th century and the first half of the 20th century), but from Geneva. The analysis of this model, thus, taken from the West to an East-European space aims to see how, in the case of concept translation – of theoretical and cultural transfer –, translation itself answers to the demands of today's literary market: how does this transfer take place, from a source-culture to a target-culture, how can we examine it from a transnational theory perspective? The research of esthetical and political issues that the Romanian society (together with the East-European one) has faced in the 70s could be the solution itself. My paper shall therefore focus on analyzing the circulation of critical texts, both in translation and in critical debates and theoretical constructions, in periodical texts, as well as in critical volumes – and the main example for this is the Romanian translation of irony concept at Jean Starobinski.

Keywords: Geneva School of Literary Criticism, translation, post-war literary criticism, melancholy, Jean Starobinski.

RECEPTAREA ȘCOLII DE CRITICĂ LITERARĂ DE LA GENEVA. IRONIA LUI JEAN STAROBINSKI ÎN TRADUCERILE ROMÂNEȘTI (Rezumat)

Dacă discursul oficial în studiile literare ale perioadei postbelice era cel venit pe filieră structuralistă, cel al criticii de idei/criticii de la Geneva pătrunde din spațiul francofon ca o revenire asupra contextelor de limbă franceză, de data aceasta nu de la Paris (ca în secolul al XIX-lea și prima jumătate a secolului XX), ci de la Geneva. Analizarea modelului de construcție al *criticii geneveze*, așadar, transportat dintr-un spațiu occidental într-unul est-european își propune să urmărească în ce măsură, în cazul traducerii de concept – al transferului teoretic și cultural –, traducerea însăși răspunde cerințelor pieței literare actuale: cum are loc acest transfer, dinspre cultura-sursă înspre cultura-țintă, dacă interogăm din perspectiva teoriilor transnaționale. Investigarea unor problematice de ordin estetic și politic cu care societatea românească (și est-europeană deopotrivă) s-a confruntat în anii 70 este și soluția la care propunerea de față recurge prin analiza importului de text critic tradus și comentat, fie în revistele culturale ale perioadei, fie în volume – exemplul de la care pornesc în analiză e cel al traducerii conceptului de ironie de la Jean Starobinski.

Cuvinte-cheie: Școala de la Geneva, traducere, critică literară postbelică, melancolie, Jean Starobinski.

VARIATIONS OF ROMANTIC IRONY IN THE WRITINGS OF THE MOLDOVAN FORTY-EIGHTERS

The destiny of romanticism is undoubtedly linked to irony as to a turntable of the circumstances under which the evolution of a Western consciousness of modernity takes place with increasingly clear signs. A specific type of irony meant to activate “the true depth”¹ of Romanticism is at stake, without which the Romantic movement would be reduced to a form of precarious sentimental spiritualism. This paper aims to investigate the discursive nuances of elitist irony in the prose of the Forty-Eighters in the Principality of Moldova and in their entire approach to radiographing their national identity and the space between two distinct mental boundaries. Romanian Forty-Eighters generously employ the traditional rhetorical figure of antiphrasis, defined as highlighting an image by its contrast. This method also involves a formative dimension based on the evaluation and training of human morals and types targeted by the ironic gaze of the narrative voice. Simultaneously, while looking at the ideation substrata of the discourse, the detachment and critical distancing from the artificiality of the represented space are perceived, through irony, as premises for a new vision on the world.

If in the mechanisms of rhetorical irony logical function and the prevalence of opposites work as operating principles, the educational and evaluative character of irony is constituted as an axiological function under the dominance of persiflage². Classical rhetorical irony, still present in France at the beginning of the 19th century (and by extension, in the Romanian Principalities, given their Francophile sympathies), is increasingly fading. Its presence is almost completely erased in Germany, where the Romantics of the Jena school (Tieck, Solger, Novalis and the Schlegel brothers) lay the foundations for a philosophical reinterpretation of the concept of irony³. Romantic irony is theorized by Friedrich Schlegel in a series of publications in the Berlin magazine *Lyceum der schönen Künste* (1797) and in *Athenäum*, a magazine founded together with his brother, August Wilhelm Schlegel⁴. Schlegelian idealism emerges in response to Cartesian rationalism and “assimilates irony with paradox, transforming it into the expression of a

¹ Alain Vaillant, *Dictionnaire du Romantisme*, Paris, CNRS Éditions, 2012, pp. 84-85: “la vrai profondeur”. Unless otherwise indicated, the quotations are translated into English by the author of this paper.

² Corina Croitoru, *Politica ironiei în poezia românească sub comunism [The Politics of Irony in the Romanian Poetry under the Communist Regime]*, Cluj-Napoca, Casa Cărții de Știință, 2014, p. 29.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 29.

⁴ Ernst Behler, *Irony and the Discourse of Modernity*, Seattle & London, University of Washington Press, 1990, pp. 73-75.

fundamental freedom: that of simultaneously affirming one thing and its opposite”⁵. In the Romantic ideology, irony manifests itself as an attitude inherent in self-consciousness. It revolves around the Christian idea of duality that characterizes humanity – physicality and spirituality, body and spirit, depth and surface⁶. In this framework, the innovation lies in the oscillation of the two components that compete out of inertia to obtain an equal share of the value and dignity inherent in each element. This pendulum also involves the category of the grotesque as “the aesthetic consequence of this principle of equality”⁷. Another invention of the Romantic century is the caricature, a component of “an aesthetic of laughter”⁸ with the same origins in the metaphysics of duality that positions man outside nature, unable to integrate into universal harmony. In the terms of Alain Vaillant,

So man laughs at knowing himself superior to nature, which is simple. Or rather, man does not laugh at knowing, but at believing himself superior. Since he is dualistic, he is aware that while one part of him (the bodily) is weak and miserable, the other (the spiritual) nevertheless gives him a strength of his own. The psychological process of laughter comes from the conflict between these two intimate beliefs. The moment he regrets his weakness, he experiences a sudden relief to feel endowed, in spite of everything, with a singular strength, and then he bursts out laughing⁹.

Regarding the philosophical dimension of irony, Hegel (from a position of deeply teleological thinking) rivals Schlegel’s perspective on irony, appearing relativistic and extremely modern. For Hegel, irony has the status of “absolute infinite negativity”, a definition adopted by Kierkegaard in his doctoral thesis defended at the University of Copenhagen in 1841. He asserted irony’s quality in the very non-dialectical nature of negativity – “rejecting synthesis, irony ultimately rejects the closure in the system”¹⁰. Kierkegaard’s concept of irony as subjective freedom resonates, despite its Hegelian paternity, with Schlegel’s perception of irony as fundamental freedom, so that “irony continues to be valued by the

⁵ Corina Croitoru, *Politica ironiei*, p. 30: “asimilează ironia cu paradoxul, transformând-o în expresia unei libertăți fundamentale: aceea de a afirma simultan un lucru și contrariul său”.

⁶ Alain Vaillant, *Dictionnaire*, p. 86, 95.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 86: “la conséquence esthétique de ce principe d’égalité”.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 95: “une esthétique du rire”.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 95: “L’homme rit donc de se savoir supérieur à la nature, qui est simple. Ou plutôt, l’homme ne rit pas de se savoir, mais de se croire supérieur. Comme il est duel, il est conscient que, si une partie de lui (la corporelle) est faible et misérable, l’autre (la spirituelle) lui confère cependant une force qui lui est propre. Le processus psychologique du rire vient de la conflagration entre ces deux intimes convictions. Au moment où il se désole de sa faiblesse, il éprouve un brusque soulagement à se sentir, malgré tout, doué d’une force singulière, et il éclate alors de rire”.

¹⁰ Corina Croitoru, *Politica ironiei*, p. 31: “respingând sinteza, ironia refuză, în fond, închiderea în sistem”.

romantic descent for its relativistic and anti-systemic spirit”¹¹.

The innovation consists, therefore, in resizing irony through the philosophical lens, turning it from a simple discursive rhetorical figure into a complex vision of the world. In the writings of the Forty-Eighters from Moldova, the irony draws a line of adjustment to a changing world, in the midst of some confrontations of values between generations and a fascinating game of power out of which Romanian modernity is built. Alain Vaillant’s perception of irony as “the salt of social or cultural life, bringing a flavour supplement to all forms of exchange”¹² is all the more relevant for the Romanian society of the early 19th century.

Literary texts encompass three dimensions – the social, the ideological and the philosophical – in which we find manifestations meant to order the world of a century, in this instance the 19th century. The same dimensions embrace manifestations that equally construct and structure the creative process integrating in it the necessary tools for the reception of the text. Besides providing a famous hyper-protection to the text, irony is a literary practice increasingly found in the Forty-Eighters’ texts. The rationale for this toolkit is to orient the reader’s gaze to articulating the reading act with the intention of reshaping the receptor’s vision against the values of an Eastern pattern rooted in the long Phanariot domination. In opposition to it, the latest Romanian cultural ideal is mirrored by Western liberal-progressive principles brought to the Principality by young generations formed in Western Europe, by foreign or Romanian diplomats, or by the Organic Regulations (1831–1832) and the Russian administration.

This new vision of the world showcased in the writings of the Moldovan Forty-Eighters outlines not only an ethos of change, of an intention to overcome the backwardness attributed by intellectuals to the Ottoman influence, but also a cultural memory. This memory is vibrant, creative and fertile precisely through the unfaithfulness and the incongruities of the revealed recollections, but also because of the innovative dynamics and rhythm by which places of memory as perpetuation or renewal contribute to the crystallization of consciousness and identity. The shaping of cultural identity as a component of national consciousness takes place by bringing the past closer and orienting the present in the direction and in support of a synchronization with the prosperity of European culture. The West is constituted as an integrating horizon for the Romanian cultural specificities, highlighted in accordance with the values of Europe. From a Forty-Eighter point of view, these are the values Romanians programmatically identify with and also the principles they share through origin, ethnicity, the historical past the purity of language. The obstacle encountered in fulfilling their mission consists in the traces

¹¹ *Ibidem*: “ironia continuă să fie valorizată în descendență romantică pentru spiritul său relativist și antisistemic”.

¹² Alain Vaillant, *La civilisation du rire*, Paris, CNRS Éditions, 2016, p. 154: “le sel de la vie sociale ou culturelle, donnant un supplément de goût à toutes les formes d’échange”.

of a specific oriental society that threatens to take over the image of the Romanian identity and thus to mislead the Western view of the Principalities, but also to undermine the cultural mediation process undertaken by Romanian intellectuals.

Together with an imperious need for rapprochement with the Western culture, the literary landscape depicts the habit of chastising the moral and ethical shortcomings resulted from a civilization based on progress and emancipation. Such commonplaces are found in sketches of morals, in the descriptions of “dancing evenings”, in physiognomies and even in paintings of nature, the sanctioned customs being isolated, through the practice of irony, as examples of superficiality. Iași, the capital of the Principality, is *par excellence* the setting, the literary place where all the phenomena inherent in the modernization process are found, combined in a mosaic of contrasts that offers an authentic picture of the time. The most relevant examples, in this respect, can be found in Vasile Alecsandri (1818–1890)’s *Iași in 1844* (1845) and *Un salon din Iași* [A Parlour in Iași] (1855), in Mihail Kogălniceanu (1817–1891)’s *Fiziologia provincialului în Iași* [The Physiology of the Provincial in Iași] (1844), *Soirées dansantes (Adunări dănuitoare)* [Dancing Soirees] (1839), *Nou chip de a face curte* [The New Way of Courting] (1840), in Costache Negruzzi (1808–1868)’s *Fiziologia provincialului* [Physiology of the Provincial] (1840), in Dimitrie Ralet (1817–1858)’s *Provincialii și ieșenii* [The Provincials and the People of Iași] (1844), in Alecu Russo (1819–1859)’s *Iașii și locuitorii lui în 1840* [Iași and its Inhabitants in 1840] (1840).

In accordance with his nature, Vasile Alecsandri’s irony is kind and friendly. He possesses a refined ironic stroke manifested as sympathy specific to the gesture of patting someone on the shoulder, rather than to the moralizing intention of correcting social morals. His sketch *Iași in 1844*, addressed to Kogălniceanu and published in the periodical *Calendarul Foaiei satești* in 1845, intends to illustrate a walk through the city. The piece begins by theorizing the wish to travel. He ironically detaches himself from the model of the traveller with a map or a plan, devoid of fantasy and similar to a courier who wears himself as a package or even as a “mail envelope”¹³. Bringing into question the slightly caustic observation of an “honourable old man” on the pliable nature of Romanians, who “become Turks with Turks, French with Frenchmen, Englishmen with Englishmen. [...] Who knows, if the Hindus would come to the country, perhaps they would become mandarins and they would be called Cing-ching-tung-fo?”¹⁴, Alecsandri detaches himself from this comment by an argument about tradition, referring to the structure of the Romanian society, made up by a majority of peasants, the

¹³ V. Alecsandri, *Opere IV: Proză* [Writings IV. Prose]. Edited by Georgeta Rădulescu-Dulgheru, București, Minerva, 1974, p. 76: “plic de poștă”.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 78-79: “se fac turci cu turcii, francezi cu francezii, englezi cu englezii. [...] Cine știe, de-or veni hinezii în țară, dacă ei nu s-or face mandarina și dacă nu s-or numi Cing-ching-tung-fo?”.

custodians of the authentic national character illustrated by their folk costumes, language and customs, whose world is an incorruptible stronghold but who are also exposed to the influences to which townspeople are prone. In fact, the highlighted contrasts in the description of the city generously allow the practice of a rhetorical form of irony. Equally, in order to render idyllic nature in opposition to a derisive urban landscape, Alecsandri uses the rhetorical figure of hyperbole; the original view of the surroundings accelerates the ritual of description without allowing for any stopover at all – “We start: the trees on all sides stretch out their branches laden with fruit, but my running quill does not allow me to obey the impulse I urge myself to. He grabbed the valley and fled like lightning, because the Răpidea [Fast] hill does not bear such an appropriate name for nothing”¹⁵. The princely park of Socola has the disadvantage of positioning itself in front of the seminary, the “holy priests factory”¹⁶, a local religious institution treated with an irony caused by the tendency to discredit any notion associated with the Phanariot period, therefore also the Eastern Orthodox ethos.

Another excerpt of particular expressiveness is the representation of the city through the image of a barefoot boyar with a crown on his head; “Iași is very similar” to him, as “its centre, located on the hillside, is made up of large and beautiful houses where luxury reigns, whereas the slums scattered on the slopes of that hill are made up predominantly of huts covered with reeds, where poverty lies. The head wears a crown, and the legs are bare!”¹⁷. An emblematic image for the stage of the ongoing urbanization process is that of mud, *glodul, tina*, “which always adorns the streets of our capital”¹⁸. Its expressiveness is rendered by practising elitist irony. In particular, the latter consists in establishing comforting, elevated cultural frameworks that sweeten the inconveniences of reality. The main culture that establishes these frameworks is, of course, the European one:

...the mud [...] deserves to be known in the world, just like the mists of London, like the dust of Odessa, like the dampness of Paris, like the fiery wind of Naples (Sirocco) and so on. Iași often has a Venetian look, its narrow streets turned into swampy canals. Wherefrom we get the following conclusion: that the Iași dweller is an amphibian that lives half of its life on land and swims in the mud the other half. A

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 80: “Ne pornim: copacii din toate părțile îmi întind crengile lor încărcate de poame, dar fugariul meu, condeiul, nu mă lasă să mă supun îndemnului ce-mi fac. El au apucat la vale și fuge ca un fulger, căci dealul *Răpidea* nu poartă în zădar un nume atât de potrivit”.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 80: “fabrică sfântă de popi”.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 82: “Iașii samănă foarte mult”, căci „centrul său așezat pe zarea unui deal este compus de case mari și frumoase în care domnește luxul, când dinprotivă mahalalele lui împrăștiute pe coastele aceluia deal sînt alcătuite mai mult din bordeie acoperite cu stuh, unde zace sărăcia. Capul poartă coroană și picioarele sînt goale!”.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 85: “ce împodobește mai totdeauna ulițele capitaliei noastre”.

pleasant and desirable life! We recommend it to all lovers of soft life¹⁹.

What is noteworthy in this fragment is the delight that elitist irony cultivates in the discourse through a logic of the imprecision of conventions: on the one hand, submitting the Moldovan urban space to a European affiliation, on the other, tarnishing the inhabitants' reputation by association with amphibians; either perceived through the filter of a "Venetian look" or "comfortable and comfort-loving", they remain captive, even by only half of their dual nature, to a dishonourable space belonging to the backward Orient. In the postscript, Alecsandri writes to Kogălniceanu that, despite the beneficial changes that have taken place, "the Iași mud has not dried up" – but "Patience; soon the merciful fate will un-muddle our country and capital city. Until then, *vale* [be well]!"²⁰. The phenomena of "entanglement" and "disentanglement" are extrapolated by the author from the social sphere of the country and the capital to the discursive register of the creative act. The clogging of Alecsandri's carriage in the mud also causes his speech to stumble – "But I see that I have delved so deeply into this subject that it is impossible for me to stir and step forward. [...] Please, my friend, have patience for a few days, until the city dries up a little, and then I will gladly follow my walk through Iași"²¹. A Romantic predilection²², the stroll becomes, in this case, an indispensable condition for speech.

Un salon din Iași [A Parlour in Iași], published in *România literară*, focuses on the connections between men and women, between comrades, the way they compete, the ceremony of courting, the frivolity and superficiality of salon meetings in general. A dramatically conceived moral sketch, developed, therefore, as a performance, Alecsandri's text includes human representations rendered in the impersonal tones of some ridiculous preoccupations. For example, the reference to the ladies and their naming is mediated either by a clothing item: "Velvet dress", "Crepe dress", "Lady with a diadem", "Lady with a garland", or by a piece of furniture in the room – "Lady from the clavichord", "Lady on the Couch", "Lady on the Chair" (potentially a Romanian comedy of names *avant la lettre*), while the male characters are given either relatively neutral names: "The Man", "The Glabrous Knight", "Gentlemen X, C, V", or functional names: "a Boyar in a

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 85: "tina [...] merită a fi cunoscută în lume, întocmai ca negurile Londrii, ca colbul Odesii, ca umezala Parisului, ca vântul înfocat a Neapolii (Sirocco) ș.c.l. Adeseori Iași are o privire venețiană prin ulițele lui prifăcute în canale mlăștinoase. De unde tragem următoarea închiere: că iașanul este o ființă amfibie care trăiește giumatate din viața lui pe uscat și care înoată în tină ceealaltă giumatate. Viață plăcută și vrednică de dorit! Noi o recomandăm tuturor iubitorilor de trai molatic".

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 85: "glodul Iașilor nu s-au mai uscat" – dar „Răbdare; în curând soarta îndurătoare ne va dizgloda și țara și capitalia. Păn-atunci însă, *vale!*".

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 85: "Dar văd că m-am adâncit atât de mult în sujetul acesta, încât îmi este cu neputință a mă urni din loc spre a păși mai înainte. [...] Te rog dar, prietine, ca să aibi răbdare vro câteva zile, până ce se va mai usca puțin orașul, și atunci voi urma cu mulțămire primblarea mea prin Iași".

²² Alain Vaillant, *Dictionnaire*, p. 116.

surplice”, “The Journalist”, “a Former Minister”, “The Equerry”²³. The derisory nature of their discussions about the French and British battles with the Russians in the Crimean War, the scene in which the equerry is ridiculed by others (he loses his composure and begins to cry, extremely concerned about his country’s fate), or the frame in which the boyar in a surplice leaves the room, offended by some disparaging remarks about his clothes²⁴, all of these subtextually indicate Alecsandri’s slight reservation towards the import of unseemly western elements of civilization. The author’s alter-ego, Mr. X, the “eternal traveller”²⁵ and the skilful storyteller of the parties, always “in love with a flower”²⁶ (an allusion to the loss of his beloved Elena Negri), ends the sketch with a tragic account of the sinking of the ship he had travelled on. The hostess strategically intervenes, right at the end of the story, accusing the men of retiring and ordering them to resume their roles as gentlemen and invite the ladies to dance.

This gesture is also found in Mihail Kogălniceanu’s sketch *Soirées dansantes*²⁷ and it illustrates a main principle that supports the good deployment of the soiree, but also frustrates male guests. In its discursive construction, Kogălniceanu ironically uses the register of ecclesiastical language:

But above all let the holy angel protect you from the hosts who come to grab you even from the book room [the library of the household] [...] Oh! Oh! May God protect you from the ladies in red dresses, to whom you must give a counter-dance as alms. ‘From fire, the sword, red dresses, from enemy invasion, from white turbans, from pestilence, from Ali Tebeli the pasha of Ianina’. I was saying these pious words²⁸ under my breath when, out of the corner of my eye, I saw the hostess of the house coming towards me²⁹.

²³ „Rochia de catifea”, „Rochia de crep”, „Dama cu diadem”, „Dama cu ghirlandă”, „Dama de la clavir”, „Dama de pe canape”, „Dama de pe jilț”, „Bărbatul”, „Cavalerul spân”, „Domnii X, C, V”, „un Boier cu anterior”, „Jurnalul”, „un Fost-ministru”, „Aghiotantul”.

²⁴ V. Alecsandri, *Opere IV*, pp. 99-100.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 101: “vecinul călător”.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 91: “înamorat de o floare”.

²⁷ Published in *Albina românească*, in 1839; it consists of an adaptation to the Moldovan realities of a sketch with the same title written by the French author J. Rafael in vol. XIII of the collection *Paris ou le Livre des cent et un*, published in Paris between 1831–1834 in fifteen volumes.

²⁸ Kogălniceanu refers to the following prayer of the Orthodox service: “Again we pray for the safekeeping of this holy church and this city, and of all cities and towns from pestilence, famine, earthquake, flood, fire and the sword, from invasion of enemies, civil war, and unforeseen death”.

²⁹ Mihail Kogălniceanu, *Opere I. Beletistica, studii literare, culturale și sociale* [Works I. Fiction, Literary, Cultural and Social Studies]. Edited by Dan Simonescu, București, Editura Academiei RSR, 1974, pp. 39-40: “mai ales să te ferească sfântul înger de gazdele care vin de te apucă pân’ și din odaia cărților [...] Of! Of! Să te ferească Dumnezeu de damele cu rochii roșii, cărora trebuie să le faci pomană o contredansă. ‘De foc, de sabie, de rochii roșii, de războiul dintre noi, de turbane albe, de ciumă, de Ali Tebeli pașă de Ianina’. Ziceam încet aceste cucernice cuvinte, când, cu colțul ochiului, zării pe gazda casei ce venea spre mine”.

Throughout the literary sketch, the author adopts a voice steeped in acid and caustic irony, but also the gaze of a fine and unforgiving observer. The practice of analogy extends to the culinary register – the vinaigrette is the specialty that mirrors the heterogeneous character of the participants at the soiree. The successful moment of the narrator in Alecsandri's salon (i.e., Mr. X) takes a different path in Kogălniceanu's writing: it acquires other features, such as the flatness and derision of men's preoccupations: "Men constantly talk about jobs, lawsuits, extracted teeth and horseshoes of dead horses"³⁰. From one end of the room to the other you hear their cries, which is very interesting, I promise you"³¹. Ironizing the rhetorical principle of "obtaining a contrast without failure, because you need contrasts in everything"³² and its commonplace character, Kogălniceanu still takes account of it in the construction of his descriptive micro-medallions dedicated to women. Those passages abound in delightful inflections of the narrative voice: the solemn tone about Celestine's angelic beauty, a "celestial" suggestive name, turns into a persiflage attitude, and the rhetorical artifice "let me not speak to you about" introduces on the one hand the type of the badly shod erudite with ink-stained fingers and of the lover who admires knights, reads novels and is enchanted with love, on the other, "thousands of other female specialties [in a culinary meaning], which are found in all dancing soirees"³³.

In effect, the interchangeable dynamics of the tone of speech can be noticed from the very first pages. Kogălniceanu opens his work with reflections on the delightful occupation of attending these soirees. The day after the ball involves a whole ceremony of remembrance, of reliving the event – "with a delightful memory of thoughts", by reconstructing objects and clothing in the room – "the pieces of my bright attire from the previous day", "scattered in the middle of the room"³⁴. Personified, they are invested with the convalescent state of the narrator after the party – "yellow slippers, sleeping on the hearth like a warming cat", "the high collar rolled under the bed", "the red britches dropped on the carpet"³⁵. Through *captatio benevolentiae*, Kogălniceanu relies on self-irony in relation to the different postures he adopts at these soirees over time: "I say nothing, but still I

³⁰ The equivalent of the English idiom *flogging a dead horse*; in Romanian, *a umbla după potcoave de cai morți* [*ad litteram*: looking for the horseshoes of dead horses].

³¹ Mihail Kogălniceanu, *Opere I*, p. 37: "Bărbații vorbesc neconținut trebi, procesuri, dinți scoși și potcoave găsite la cai morți. De la un capăt al odăiei la celălalt auzi strigătele lor, lucru foarte interesant, te încredințez".

³² *Ibidem*, p. 38: "a face contrast negreșit, pentru că în toate trebuie contrasturi".

³³ *Ibidem*, pp. 38-40: "mii alte specialități [termen culinar, my note L.T.S.] femeiești, ce se găsesc mai în toate suarelele dansante".

³⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 34: "cu o suvenire desfătăcioasă de gânduri", "rămășițele strălucitei mele tuatele din ziua trecută", "împrăștiată în mijlocul odăii".

³⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 34: "galbenii papuci, dormind pe vatră, ca o mătă ce se încălzește", "cilicul cel globos rostogolit sub pat", "șacșării cei roșii aruncați pe covor".

want to tell you” about the memory of youth, when “I was never only half delighted; the closeness of a ball emptied my heart of all the small annoyances I had”, in contrast to the self-control that maturity claims: “Now I go to the ball only to play the suffering role of a hanger-on” or to the lack of mobility specific to old age, when “My feet rest in a dark corner of the room and like an old soldier, disabled, his rusty sword hanged up at the bed head, I also hang my cotton thighs on the sash of a window”³⁶. Self-irony is also outlined in the remarks on the newly adopted dress code: “Because I also discarded the stiff collar in favour of the hat and the purple britches in favour of the tight pants”³⁷. The speech then turns into a storm of mordant irony on evoking the physiology of the very pleasant man³⁸ who always dances and never rests when he goes into society, who is courteous and jovial, who has humour and masters the art of anecdotes³⁹. Kogălniceanu presents, in effect, the concessions to be made in order to be accepted by exquisite society. The extremely acid descriptive passage also denotes the self-ironic consciousness of the author who is himself a subject to his own radiography.

The terms of these compromises are also found in the text of Alecu Russo, *Iași and its inhabitants in 1840*. In a society dominated by “aristocratic arrogance”, young people from Iași face boredom (“There is no life in Iași”, “There is no city in the world to which the word could apply better: *seeking to kill time*. [...] We don't have a public life”⁴⁰), so they “sit methodically around a game table and follow in the footsteps of the old men, or yawn, cursing the harmless Iași who cannot provide them any party”⁴¹. “The ridiculousness of our men's spirits”, the society of every house as a “fortress armed with thorns”, “the sharp tongues of all the partisans”, “the ease and bad words” of women and the laziness of men require amendments by which, if you dare to formulate them, “you get on the wrong site of the good world”, of the “great nobility”, especially “in a petty society full of

³⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 34: “nu zic nimic, dar totuși zic”, “niciodată nu mă desfățam pe jumătate; apropierea unui bal îmi deșerta inima de toate micile supărări ce aveam”, “acum mă duc la bal numai spre a juca rolul pătimitor de băgător de samă”, “Picioarele mi se odihnesc într-un ungher întunecat al sălii și ca un soldat bătrân, invalid, ce-și anină ruginita sabie la căpătâiul său, asemine îmi anin și eu pulpele de bumbac la cerceveaua unei ferești”.

³⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 34: “Căci și eu am lepădat cilicul pentru pălărie și purpuriile șacșări pentru strâmții pantalonii”.

³⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 35-36.

³⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 35: “În ce colț al spițăriei oare au învățat ei așa frumoșele lucruri? Aceasta nu știu. Dar glumele lor mă băteau la ureche ca clopotul de la Barnovschi într-o zi de sărbătoare. Mai pune încă și acel râs lancaviu, ce samănă cu muzica broaștelor”.

⁴⁰ Alecu Russo, *Scrieri alese* [*Selected Works*]. Edited by Geo Șerban, București, ESPLA, 1970, pp. 321-322: “Nu este nici o viață în Iași”, „În nici un oraș din lume nu s-ar putea aplica mai bine vorba: *a căuta să-ți omori vremea*. [...] La noi nu este viață publică”.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, p. 322: “se așază metodic în jurul unei mese de joc și merg pe urmele babacilor ori cască, blăstămând nevătmătorul Iași, care nu le poate da nici o petrecere”.

chatter like ours”⁴². Equally, directly naming these amendments would undermine the consideration due to the older generation, so that the conflict between the need for action and the requirement of diplomacy takes on the nuances of martyrdom⁴³. The existence of authentic salons of *bon ton*, as in the West, is undercut both by the passivity and duplicity of the young generation, and by the fundamentalism of the boyars. To illustrate this dynamic, Alecu Russo uses refined irony of a romantic nature – he constructs some literary frames and characters that fall precisely in with the ideas and images common at that time (the superiority of the generation who studies in the West, the oriental backwardness of the boyars), extremely edifying for the epoch’s atmosphere and for the chromatics of the collective mind of that period. Ultimately, Russo interrogate these frames without excluding himself (a young man who studied in the West and also the son of a boyar) from this approach:

And we, the sons of an age of civilization, who have warmed ourselves at the hearths of Europe, have not yet freed ourselves from our prejudices of rank, rights, interests, small vanity, forgotten abroad, but found with pleasure on return; we still find charm in the old abuses that strike both in justice and in judgment, and born with civilization, we find a wonderful escape in the customs and habits of the country against things that might hinder our own convenience. And all of us, pretentious Parisians, republicans, Swiss, terrible students from Heidelberg and Stuttgart, we are all great reformers with our lips, until the facts also follow to reply⁴⁴,

But a select salon like this cannot be forgiven by them [the boyars], especially because the smoke of the hookah is completely forbidden, which could darken the brightness of its gilded flowers, and because national swear words are not allowed at all; good Moldovans and good patriots, they are unable to say gently: ‘damn!’ or ‘*morbleu!*’ It’s not resounding enough and it’s not logical. In this regard, it is true, that is not very good, because swearing is as necessary for the Moldovan as water is to the fish, the air to the birds and bread to all people. Our ancestors left us the legacy of Moldova with its heroic energy and we, as rightful descendants, are very much forced to follow that tradition, especially when it comes to swearing⁴⁵.

⁴² *Ibidem*, p. 323: “Numeroasele ridicole ale oamenilor noștri de duh”, „cetățuie înarmată cu țepi”, „limbile ascuțite ale tuturor partizanilor”, „ușurătatea și vorbele rele”, „te pui rău cu lumea bună”, „boierimea mare”, „într-o societate meschină și plină de vorbării ca a noastră”.

⁴³ *Ibidem*, p. 321.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 322: “iar noi, fii ai unei epoci de civilizație, care ne-am încălzit la focarele Europei, nu ne-am eliberat încă de prejudecățile noastre de rang, de drepturi, de interese, de mică vanitate, uitate în străinătate, pe care însă cu plăcere de găsim la întoarcere; noi mai găsim încă farmec în vechile abuzuri care lovesc și-n justiție și-n judecată, și născuți cu civilizația, noi avem o scăpare minunată în obiceiurile și deprinderile țării împotriva lucrurilor care ar putea să stânjenească bunul nostru plac. Și toți câți suntem, parizieni pretențioși, republicani, șvițereni, cumpliți studenți de la Heidelberg și Stuttgart, toți suntem mari reformatori cu gura, până ce vor veni și faptele să răspundă”.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 324: “Dar un salon ales ca acesta nu-l pot ei [boierii, my note, L.T.S.] ierta, mai cu samă pentru că e oprit cu desăvârșire fumul ciubucelor, care ar putea să întunece strălucirea înfloriturilor

In this aristocratic inflexible, selective and prissy atmosphere, with “too uptight and measured appearance”⁴⁶, the refined reputation of the salons lasts very little. Russo ironically uses the mythological image of the fairies that patronize the soirees, in contrast to the image of the opportunistic hostess interested in social ranks:

Too shy to create an autonomous status, not brave enough to rise above the banal ridiculousness and even more banal jokes, prostrate before the increasing victories and fragrant influences of the famous salon, the fairies of these half-temples saw their court slowly dissipating. [...] The mistress of the house seems to want to match her smiles and half-faces to the place occupied by the guests on the hierarchical ladder [...], due to the great lack of tact, which shows a defect of soul or education in those delicate procedures, in the gentle and natural attentions which we are accustomed to regard as the gift of womanhood. I think there will be a lot of bon-ton in Iași when the salons are salons and not genealogy offices or exchange houses⁴⁷.

In Russo’s text and, generally, in his entire memoir work, two worlds are arguing and the viewer, whether reader or narrator, is invited to decide his/ her side and to outline his / her own vision. A prominent liberal, Alecu Russo believes in the triumph of innovative ideas, but also remains a nostalgic of patriarchal Moldova⁴⁸. The evolution of these mutually disarming oppositions can be pursued at the discursive level even in the fragments seemingly tributary to only one of the opposite mental directions, such as the one from the beginning of the sketch:

The new Regulations governing Moldova, the contact with the Russian armies which ploughed the Principalities, the visits of several travellers, the swarm of young people who spent years in European cities, in the middle of a life and customs diametrically opposed to the quiet and settled customs and life of their homeland,

lui aurite, și pentru că nu sînt îngăduite de loc sudălmile naționale; ei, care sînt buni moldoveni și buni patrioți, otova și fără fasoane, sînt în neputință să zică cu gingășie: ‘drace!’ ori ‘morbleu!’ Nu-i destul de răsunător și nu-i nici logic. În privința asta, e drept, nu-i tocmai bine, căci sudalma e tot așa de trebuincioasă moldovanului, ca apa peștelui, aerul paserilor și pînea tuturor oamenilor. Străbunii ne-au lăsat moștenire Moldova cu energia ei eroică și noi, ca drepti urmași, ne silim foarte mult să împlinim diata, mai ales în ce privește sudălmile”.

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 325: “înfățișarea prea țeapănă și măsurată”.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 325-326: “Prea sfioase spre a-și crea o stare neatârnată, neîndestul de cutezătoare pentru a se înălța deasupra ridicolelor banale și a glumelor și mai banale, căzute în fața izbânzilor crescînde și a influențelor parfumate ale faimosului salon, zînele acestor semitemple au văzut cum curtea lor se risipește încetul cu încetul. [...] stăpîna casei parcă ar vrea să-și potrivească zămbetele și semigrimasele echivalente cu locul pe care-l ocupă oaspeții pe scara ierarhică [...], din lipsă mare de tact, care arată un defect al sufletului ori al educației în procedeele delicate, în atențiile acelea gingașe și firești pe care sîntem obișnuiți să le privim ca un dar al femeii. Cred că va fi mult *bon-ton* la Iași cînd saloanele vor fi saloane și nu birouri de genealogie, ori case de schimb”.

⁴⁸ Mihai Zamfir, *Scurtă istorie. Panorama alternativă a literaturii române* [A Short History. Alternative Panoramic View of the Romanian Literature], vol. I, București, Cartea Românească, Iași, Polirom, 2011, pp. 120-121.

changed the face of Iași, introducing other views, other ideas and a different way of looking at things. As in any country on the verge of regenerating, we have two principles caught in a struggle, a stifled but huge and incessant struggle between the elders and the young, between fallen worn-out habits and daring innovation full of power and life; a deadly battle between the old and the new, in which the hard-earned victory will belong to the latter⁴⁹.

The ironic remarks about the snobbery of the elite – for which life in the countryside is purely administrative, and the joy of long walks (a Western import)⁵⁰ can be achieved only in the urban Copou Park or in other public gardens – translate a “patriarchal flavour”⁵¹ which is so specific to the Forty-Eight and post-Forty-Eight prose.

In Kogălniceanu’s text, *Nou chip de a face curte* [A New Way of Courting] – a sketch that presents the contrast between marriage habits in the villages and the opportunistic family ties in the cities – the critical tone so specific to the author directly chastises the disinterest of the urban society in rural life and its inherent beauty:

Sometimes you may happen to go to the countryside; you don’t do this to marvel at the beauties of nature, to watch the great sunrise over the high peaks of the Carpathians, to breathe the fresh air on the plains of Moldova and the Siret, to hear the delightful song of the nightingale, to eventually recite with Văcărescu: I took my grief to the Carpathians,/ I wanted to give it to them;/ The echo, the leaf, the valley,/ The waters multiply it to me⁵².

A seemingly paradoxical aspect with Alecu Russo is the fact that his claiming of patriarchal tradition and his critique of “old patriarchalism”⁵³ can coexist, in a spirit of incongruity that Mihai Zamfir attributes to the Forty-Eighters’ generation who, although they declare themselves progressive, continue to be conformist and

⁴⁹ Alecu Russo, *Scrieri*, p. 306: “Regulamentele nouă care stăpâneau Moldova, atingerea cu armatele rusești, care au brăzdat Principatele, vizitele câtorva călători, roiul acela de tineri care au petrecut în orașele europene în mijlocul unei vieți și al unor obiceiuri diametral opuse obiceiurilor și vieții liniștite și așezate din patria lor au schimbat fața Iașilor, introducând alte vederi, alte idei și un fel de a privi lucrurile. Ca în orice țară pe cale de regenerare, sunt la noi două principii care stau în luptă, o luptă înăbușită, însă uriașă și neconținută, între bătrân și tânăr, între obiceiul căzut și vested și inovația cutezătoare, plină de putere și de viață; o luptă pe moarte între vechi și nou, în care biruința greu câștigată va fi a celui din urmă”.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 316.

⁵¹ Mihai Zamfir, *Din secolul romantic* [From the Romantic Century], București, Cartea Românească, 1989, p. 76: “savoare patriarhală”.

⁵² Mihail Kogălniceanu, *Opere I*, p. 44: “Câteodată ți se întâmplă poate să te duci la țeară; asta n-o faci ca să te miri de frumusețile naturei, ca să privești mărețul resărit a soarelui peste înaltele vârfuri a Carpaților, ca să resuflă curatul aer de pe șesurile Moldovei și a Siretului, ca să auzi desfătăcioasa cântare a filomelei, ca să zici în sfârșit cu Văcărescu: La Carpați mi-am dus jalea,/ Lor am vrut s-o hărăzesc;/ Răsunetul, frunza, valea,/ Apele mi-o înmulțesc”.

⁵³ Alecu Russo, *Scrieri*, p. 325: “a patriarhalismului bătrânicios”.

conservative in their lifestyle⁵⁴.

Transposed into the narrative discourse, this incongruity denotes an important feature of romanticism i.e., the idealization of patriarchal living, of the past as a *topos* of authenticity. In the radiography of the dancing evenings, Kogălniceanu nostalgically relies on the memory of recent history, the Phanariot time, an epoch generally blamed by the “first people”. The description of the Oriental balls of the past seems to be taken straight from the Arab mythological stories. In comparison with these, in which “wine and milk flowed, as the Scripture says”⁵⁵, “the dancing soiree”, which belongs “exclusively to our epoch”⁵⁶, is outlined as an example by which the civilization of the western world is indirectly criticized. For example, the hostess of the event is punished for the ridiculousness of her intention to synchronize her dance with that of her chosen partner. The evoked gesture is all the more ironic as its representation is immediately followed by the almost mystical description of the old hostess of the Phanariotes and her imposing and noble presence and composure⁵⁷.

Eventually, the lamentation of the Forty-Eighters for bygone times is part of a convention of modernity, as modernity expresses a longing for lost harmony and a lament for the loss of unity that belongs to the past. In Ernst Behler’s terms, this context illustrates, despite the seeming victory of the moderns over the ancients, a subtextual authority of the latter’s presence. In other terms, from a more theoretical perspective, it signals “a delay in the full manifestation of the modern consciousness or the consciousness of modernity”⁵⁸. From the Schlegelian perspective, there is a dialectical interdependence between classicism and romanticism. In this respect, the authenticity of modernism is upheld only if it closely interacts with the values of classicism, achieving their continuity through a dynamic competition in which the world of past historical time (Ancient Greece, for instance) is not faithfully rendered at present, but reinvented and updated in a creative process whose expressive function is of a transcendent nature. In this light, the Romantics seek to reinvent the archetype of beauty in the Platonic line belonging to Ancient Greece rather than in the direction of the “classical estuary”⁵⁹ of Italy, of the South, of the Roman antiquity. Being perceived as mythical, fascinating and redemptive by important figures such as Hölderlin, Keats or Novalis, Greece is represented by the moderns as one of the most authentic veins of romanticism. It is also found in the semantic fields built by the Forty-Eighters in their texts, through cultural allusions that indicate an impressive encyclopaedic

⁵⁴ Mihai Zamfir, *Din secolul*, p. 23.

⁵⁵ Mihail Kogălniceanu, *Opere I*, p. 36: “vinul și laptele curgea, cum zice Scriptura”.

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 36: “suareta dansantă”, “numai și numai a epohăi noastre”.

⁵⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 36.

⁵⁸ Ernst Behler, *Irony*, p. 62.

⁵⁹ Mihai Zamfir, *Din secolul*, p. 21: “a limanului clasic”.

spirit of the generation.

Nostalgic for mythical patriarchy himself, Costache Negruzzi is sympathetic to the traditional Romanian space in various discursive instances. In *Letter XXV (The Country Man)*, for example, the townsman advises a peasant couple not to send their children to urban schools because that would suppress the wholesome manifestations of the authentic peasant identity. Subtextually, we also find the self-ironic tone so characteristic to Negruzzi's prose. In *Letter VIII (Why Gypsies are not Romanians)*, the description of Bogonos is extremely warm and full of consideration: "Imagine one of those old country boyars, primitive Moldavians with patriarchal skills, long clothes, cheerful and sun-drenched faces, who are always happy and content when the harvest was bountiful, who do not bother with politics"⁶⁰. Chastised for not reading the history of the gypsies in the lives of the saints, Negruzzi receives, in return, the neighbour's praise for publishing the poem *Aprodul Purice [The Chigger Page]*, which has a different effect on Bogonos than the expected one – it "made me laugh until my heart ached"⁶¹. What is noteworthy in this regard is the self-irony of the author, who concludes humorously: "The barbarian! he thought he was complimenting me, and he didn't know how humiliated I was! Can you believe it? I had made a joke, without intending to"⁶². A similar sort of self-irony is practiced by Kogălniceanu at the end of the *Soirées dansantes*, in the scene of the meeting with the housekeeper in the morning after a social event. The description of the party before Lent which his maidservant participated in on the same night is constructed in counterpoint to the elitist atmosphere of the author's soiree. Despite the primitive feel of her experience, the woman enjoyed it "like an empress"⁶³; on the other hand, although in an elite society that creates enviable appearances⁶⁴, the author felt extremely bored. Kogălniceanu's very expressive self-ironic conclusion concerns the idea that simple people enjoy life in an authentic way, unlike sophisticated people. Through irony, the nostalgia of patriarchal life is activated once again – "Hm! I said to myself, biting my lips, that if I ever want to write the story of hostess A. ... I won't let my maidservant read it"⁶⁵.

⁶⁰ Costache Negruzzi, *Opere I. Păcatele tinerețelor [Works I. The Sins of Youth]*. Edited by Liviu Leonte, București, Minerva, 1974, p. 232: "Figurează-ți unul din acei vechi boieri de țară, moldavi primitivi, cu deprinderi patriarhale, cu haine lungi, cu față voioasă și pălită de soare, care sunt întotdeauna veseli și mulțumiți când săcerisul a fost bun, care nu-și bat capul de politică".

⁶¹ *Ibidem*, p. 324: "m-a făcut să râd de mă durea inima".

⁶² *Ibidem*, p. 324: "Barbarul! gândea că-mi face un compliment, și nu știa cât mă umilea! Auzi colo! făcusem comic, fără să-mi treacă prin gând".

⁶³ Mihail Kogălniceanu, *Opere I*, p. 42: "ca o împărăteasă".

⁶⁴ Especially considering the maidservant's remark: "Ah! You are boyars! It must have been so beautiful, your party!"; "A! dumneavoastră sunteți boieri; a trebuit să fie tare frumos" (*Ibidem*).

⁶⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 19: "Hm! zisei în mine, pișcându-mi buzele, dacă vrodată voi scrie istoria sărdăresei A... nu voi da-o s-o citească jupâneasa din casă".

Returning to Negruzzi's *Letter VIII (Why Gypsies are not Romanians)*, the exchange of remarks between him and Bogonos consists of an imposing picture with a specific character. Their dialogue seems to fall under Bergson's strategy of *Jack-in-the-box*, part of his theory on laughter⁶⁶. Leaving his neighbour to tell him the story of the gypsies in the life of St. Gregory, the author repeatedly interrupts him and questions the validity of the recounted facts, in the midst of Bogonos' eloquence as a devout storyteller. The boyar's offended countenance is extremely comical: "If you won't let me say what I want, I'll stop talking!", "Very well, I'll be quiet"⁶⁷. For the third time, Bogonos loses control over the anticipation of the mechanics of a spring ("a compressed feeling which is released like a spring, and an idea that finds amusement in compressing the feeling anew"⁶⁸) and protests for no reason – "In a month's time, the council gathered. There were the bishops from the St. Petersburg Synod, from Hina and... do you want to interrupt me again? In a word, from all over the world"⁶⁹. But this time Negruzzi, the maverick participant in the jovial dialogue, had not interrupted him.

Costache Negruzzi is also the author who opens the thematic series about provincials in the literature of the time (in 1840). His *Physiology of the Provincial* is joined by *The Physiology of the Provincial in Iași* by Kogălniceanu and *The Provincials and the People of Iași*, a text by Dimitrie Ralet. Similar in many examples of the subject, each of them still differs from the others in the specific kind of irony they resort to in theorizing the various nuances of the evoked personalities. Negruzzi's provincial is first of all the landowner – the rigid "landlord boyar" ("boierul ținutaș"), with patriarchal airs, interested in his superior boyar class, eager to gain access to the aristocratic circles of society by being related to the aristocracy of Iași. On an almost imperceptible scale in relation to the towering figure of the old boyar, the type of the young provincial quietly enters the scene. He is a tardy bachelor, almost deadbeat, dressed in tight western clothes, with ambitions of a social or erotic nature, whose opportunistic nature predisposes him to being classified as an upstart. We notice the layers of a fine, almost protective irony in the warmth of the Moldovan interjection "iaca" – "look, here's a subject to talk about at least for two months", but also in the subtlety of the cultural allusions to the domestic quarrels of a landlord boyar. "Those scenes are

⁶⁶ Henri Bergson, *Laughter. An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*. Translated by Cloudesley Brereton, Maryland, Wildside Press, 2008, p. 24. See also Henri Berson, *Râsul: eseu asupra semnificației comicului*. Translation by Ana-Maria Datcu, București, All, 2014, pp. 60-66.

⁶⁷ Costache Negruzzi, *Opere I*, p. 235: "Dacă nu mă vei lăsa să spun cum mi-e spusul, tac", „Foarte bine, tac”.

⁶⁸ Henri Bergson, *Laughter*, p. 24. See also Henri Bergson, *Râsul*, p. 63: "un sentiment comprimat care se destinde ca un arc și o idee care se amuză comprimând sentimentul în mod repetat”.

⁶⁹ Costache Negruzzi, *Opere I*, p. 235: "În vremea de o lună, soborul s-au adunat. Erau vlădicii de la s. sinod din Petersburg, de la Hina și... iar vrei să mă curmi? Într-un cuvânt, din toate părțile lumii”.

worthy of Hogarth's brush"⁷⁰ in giving credit to the worthy "provincial man of spirit"⁷¹ who could, in turn, illustrate the vices of the inhabitants of the capital by being more virtuous than the way the provincial had been previously described.

Enhancing Negruzzi's writing, Kogălniceanu positions himself in his lineage, claiming this filiation with the promise of enriching the written cultural heritage by another version of the bombastically announced provincial – "Take off your hats and bow. The provincial enters the scene"⁷². However, Kogălniceanu's reader can easily recognize, from the contexts in which the protagonist takes shape, the same landlord boyar from Negruzzi's text. He has the same traditionalist and inflexible style, the same infatuation with his high social position acquired through kinship, the same passion for theatre, balls and aristocratic walks. Kogălniceanu further outlines the impact of the first impression that comes to correspond, gradually, with the imaginary projection of the city in his mental legacy enthusiastically formed since childhood, to which the ingenuity of the countryside landlord exploited by the capital's opportunists is added. With an alleged nobility in his literary projections, Kogălniceanu excludes from the category of the provincials the vulnerable groups: "the elderly, children and women"; those adopted by the capital city by means of their jobs or long stays; the intelligent, the intellectually gifted individual who "has much more spirit than six capital inhabitants of his rank", whom "his mind makes an inhabitant of the civilized world and who, wherever he shows up, has the right to stay"; the peasants – poor fellows of prolonged injustices; the extremely wealthy people, "The happy ones of this world"; the beautiful ladies and young women. On the other hand, Kogălniceanu does not forgive the "uglies", categorized as the "unshakable feature of the province, now and forever, to the end of time"⁷³.

Replying to the prediction made at the end of Negruzzi's sketch, Dimitrie Ralet, in the *Provincials and the People of Iași*, opposes the risible simplicity of the provincial to the ridiculousness of the cosmopolitan of Iași: "The people of Iași got used to talking about provincials like everyone else; without looking at the work and faith of the poor dog, they took his name beforehand as a familiar disgrace. The defence of that beast must also be mentioned. Here, however, we will join only a few types of people from Iași and province, and let the reader

⁷⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 245: "iaca materie de vorbă cel puțin pentru două luni", „Ce scene atunce, vrednice de penelul lui Hogart!”.

⁷¹ *Ibidem*, p. 245: "provințial om de duh".

⁷² Mihail Kogălniceanu, *Opere I*, p. 53: "Scoateți-vă pălăriile și vă închinați. Provincialul intră în scenă".

⁷³ *Ibidem*, p. 56: "pe bătrâni, pe copii și pe dame", "are mai mult duh decât șase capitaliști de rangul lui", "mintea sa îl face locuitor al lumii civilizate și, orișunde se înfășoșează, are drit de împământenire", "fericiții acestei lumi", "slute", "nestrămutată proprietate a provinciei, acum și pururea și în vecii vecilor".

equitably judge who can laugh of whom”⁷⁴. Equally, at the beginning of his sketch, the author confesses his continuing Kogălniceanu’s writing, which entails, from Ralet’s perspective, the need of a reply from the part of a provincial. Ralet’s declared intention is to write this reply. The text illustrates, in addition, the type of the “provincial prince” in contrast to the fancy townsman of Iași, impossible to include in the landscape of the province, but also the opportunistic type, “neither provincial nor from Iași”; “The caricature of the hasty civilization” spends his time in the capital for most of the year, neglecting his household duties. “With parental righteousness we can claim the return of our lost son. In Iași he is worse than the provincialized in the country”⁷⁵. Ambitious enough to prove that he has exceeded his condition of a provincial, “that he became an inhabitant of Iași, getting out of his mind and out of order”⁷⁶, “he is both a knight, a diplomat, a good-for-nothing (as the provincials call him), and an employee; he is all and nothing”⁷⁷. Endowed with a warm kind of irony, Ralet shows an unbiased attitude, constructing a temperate satirical verve of the descriptions. The general idea of his text is that the people of Iași and the provincials share the same human quality, with its qualities and shortcomings, so that the solution of reconciling the contrasts is extremely simple – the people of Iași “have their own to look after them; we have ours”⁷⁸.

In the literary writings of the Moldavian Forty-Eighters, the interplay between the representation of a chromatic reality of the epoch and the ideal vision of its development towards a distinct, superior, Western mental boundary, translates the Romantic confrontation between the real and the ideal, between the creative self and the reality of the represented world. In the Forty-Eighters’ prose, irony has the role of mediating this often conflicting dynamic movement. Although the stylistic directions recall a classical configuration specific to rhetorical irony, at a semantic deep level, in the subtext of this apparent childhood of Romanian prose, the critical distancing of the subject from the artificiality and incongruity of a contradictory object-world and the indispensable detachment emerge, albeit not

⁷⁴ Dimitrie Ralet, *Suvenire și impresii de călătorie în România, Bulgaria, Constantinople* [*Souvenirs and Travel Impressions in Romania, Bulgaria, Constantinople*]. Edited and preface by Mircea Angheliescu, București, Minerva, 1979, p. 250: “Ieșenii s-au deprins a vorbi de provinciali precum toți oamenii, fără a privi la slujba și la credința bietului câne, i-au luat numele înainte drept o ocară familiară. Apărarea aceluia dobitoc trebuie deosăbită. Aice însă vom alătura numai câteva tipuri de ieșeni și de provinciali, și rămâne ca cetitorul să judece fără părtinire care de care pot râde cu deadinsul”.

⁷⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 255: “nici provincial, nici ieșean”; “caricatura pripitei civilizații”, “cu dreptate părintească putem reclama întoarcerea perdutului nostru fiu. El este în Iași mai rău ca provincializatul în ținuturi”.

⁷⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 255: “că s-a ieșit, ieșindu-și din minte și din rânduială”. In Romanian, an amusing word play: “s-a ieșit” = one became an inhabitant of Iași; and “și-a ieșit din minți” = getting out of one’s mind;

⁷⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 255: “e și cavalier, și diplomat, și pierde-vară (cum îi zic provincialii), și amplotiat; el e tot și nimică”.

⁷⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 254: “ție-se ale lor de ei; nouă ne ajung ale noastre”.

without sanctioning the snobbery invested in the illusion of an unborn Western society.

Although the striking societal contrasts and the huge socio-economic gap between classes do not indicate a clarity of vision of the dreamed prosperity, whatever its nature – national, economic, intellectual, cultural etc. -- the writings of the Forty-Eighters preserve an effervescence and optimism about the future that are meant to subtly change the foundations of Romanian society. Slowly but steadily, the face of the Principalities visibly changes between 1821 and 1878. Thus, the construction of the text carries an ideological significance – the constant articulation of the cultural-political directions in which the modernization of Romanian life is outlined, in accordance with the values attested by the West. Implicitly, the process of self-reflection in formulating one's own identity is rigorously influenced from the outside. At first glance, it would seem that the result obtained can only be a conformist one. However, the interweaving of political, diplomatic, theatrical, journalistic, technological realities and the literary works issued by newly established publishing houses reveal a variety of procedures that allow the configuration of worlds and of fundamental experiences that render the “spirit of the place” in its amazing richness and diversity.

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VARIATIONS OF ROMANTIC IRONY IN THE WRITINGS OF THE MOLDOVAN FORTY-EIGHTERS

(Abstract)

Used mainly as a discursive strategy with the function of sanctioning and correcting the sharp contrasts and cultural inconsistencies, in an era of transition from East to West irony takes, in literary and journalistic discourse, various forms according to both the interrogated register - the salon, with all the French labels, the colourful bustle of the capital Iași with the wide oriental costumes and the European clothing patterns, rigid and tight – and the formative course, life experience and inner structure of each author. This paper proposes an investigation of the discursive nuances of elitist irony in the prose of the Forty-Eighters and in their entire approach to depicting their national identity as a space between two distinct mental boundaries. If Vasile Alecsandri practices a gentle type of irony corresponding to his endearing nature, Mihail Kogălniceanu adopts a pungent speech as a fine observer of his contemporary society. Equally uncompromising, Alecu Russo adopts, however, like Costache Negruzzi, a writing infused with rather self-ironic and reflective notes.

Keywords: Eastern Europe, Forty-Eighters, romantic irony, national identity, Principality of Moldavia.

VARIAȚII ALE IRONIEI ROMANTICE ÎN SCRIERILE PAȘOPTIȘTILOR MOLDOVENI

(Rezumat)

Întrebuițată îndeosebi ca strategie discursivă cu funcționalitatea de a sancționa și corija contrastele stridente și incongruențele culturale, într-o epocă aflată în tranziție de la Orient la Occident, ironia primește, în discursul literar și publicistic, forme variate în acord atât cu registrul interogant – viața de salon, cu toate etichetele franțuzești, forfota colorată a capitalei Iași cu costumele orientale largi și tiparele vestimentare europene, rigide și strâmte –, cât și cu parcursul formativ, experiența de viață și structura interioară ale fiecărui autor. Lucrarea de față propune o investigație a nuanțelor discursive pe care le comportă ironia elitistă în proza pașoptiștilor și în întregul lor demers de radiografiere a identității naționale și a unui spațiu aflat între două granițe mentalitare distincte. Dacă Vasile Alecsandri practică o ironie blândă, în acord cu firea sa amabilă și solară, Mihail Kogălniceanu adoptă un discurs caustic și neiertător, fiind un fin observator al societății contemporane lui. La fel de intransigent, mai cu seamă în polemica sa cu latiniștii ardeleni, Alecu Russo adoptă totuși, în tandem cu Costache Negruzzi, o scriere cu note mai degrabă autoironice și reflexive.

Cuvinte-cheie: Europa de Est, pașoptiști, ironie romantică, identitate națională, Principatul Moldovei.

QUAND L'IRONIE DES POÈTES ROUMAINS FAIT FRONT CONTRE LA GUERRE

Difficile à définir – puisque l'histoire du concept est en même temps, comme beaucoup de chercheurs l'ont montré¹, celle des incertitudes de son décodage –, l'ironie jouit à présent d'une pluralité d'approches. De point de vue *linguistique*, elle est traitée comme antiphrase, figure qui consiste à transmettre le contraire de ce qu'on affirme, tandis que sous l'aspect *pragmatique* elle devient une figure discursive douée d'un côté logique, mais aussi d'un côté axiologique, évaluatif, capable de produire, selon Linda Hutcheon, les réactions affectives de ceux qui la comprennent ou qui ne la comprennent pas : « l'ironie a un côté évaluatif et réussit à provoquer des réponses émotionnelles dans ceux qui la 'suivent' ou non, aussi que dans ceux que certains appellent ses 'victimes' »². Cela trahit son caractère *politique*, qui consiste à établir des relations de pouvoir (ironiste-allié-victime), mais *transidéologique*, car l'ironie peut être, selon le cas, la marque d'une supériorité dominante ou l'apanage d'une minorité dominée. Dans une approche *philosophique*, l'ironie a été conçue par les romantiques allemands comme une vision du monde, étant soit la conscience du monde comme chaos, pour Schlegel, soit une négativité infinie absolue pour Hegel qui la condamne et pour Kierkegaard qui l'apprécie³, ou désignant une bonne conscience morale au XX^{ème} siècle, pour Vladimir Jankélévitch⁴. En tant que mécanisme *psychologique*, l'ironie semble contribuer au redressement psychique de l'individu, mettant en évidence – tout comme l'humour chez Freud⁵ ou le rire chez Bergson⁶ – le refus de celui-ci à reconnaître la souffrance que le monde lui provoque. Enfin, *sociologiquement* l'ironie peut être interprétée comme forme de politesse, puisqu'elle offre la possibilité d'être agressif dans une manière complètement non-agressive⁷.

¹ C. Kerbrat-Orecchioni, M. Le Guern, P. Bange, A. Bony, *L'Ironie*, Travaux du Centre de Recherches linguistiques et sémiologiques de Lyon, Lyon, Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 1978.

² Linda Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge. The Theory and Politics of Irony*, London and New York, Routledge, 1994, p. 2. La traduction des citations nous appartient, sauf mention explicite du traducteur.

³ Ernst Behler, *Ironie et modernité*. Traduit de l'allemand par Olivier Mannoni, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1997.

⁴ Vladimir Jankélévitch, *L'Ironie*, Paris, Flammarion, 1979.

⁵ Sigmund Freud, « L'Humour », in *L'inquiétante étrangeté et autres essais*. Traduit de l'allemand par Bertrand Féron, Paris, Gallimard, 1985.

⁶ Henri Bergson, *Le Rire. Essai sur la signification du comique*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1940.

⁷ Katharina Barbe, *Irony in Context*, Amsterdam and Philadelphia, John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1995.

La versatilité du concept d'ironie est également mise en évidence par la diversité de ses typologies, inventoriées par Pierre Schoentjes dans sa *Poétique de l'ironie*⁸, où le chercheur différencie entre *l'ironie socratique* (philosophique, définie par Platon par rapport à Socrate, comme procédé de feindre l'ignorance afin de révéler la vérité), *l'ironie verbale* (expliquée, selon le cas, comme figure ou comme trope), *l'ironie romantique* (réappropriée philosophiquement par les romantiques de Jena qui lui ont attribué une valeur esthétique), *l'ironie moderne* (éthique, démocratisée après la Grande Guerre) et *l'ironie postmoderne* (synonyme de l'humour, perçu comme attitude hédoniste caractéristique à la société de consommation). À partir de cette classification, *l'ironie moderne* semble être la plus adéquate pour une analyse dédiée à la littérature événementielle, plus particulièrement à la poésie roumaine des deux guerres mondiales, puisqu'elle pose le problème d'une relation lucide de l'être humain avec la vie, qui a influencé visiblement l'évolution même des formes poétiques.

Ironies poétiques des combattants dans la Première Guerre mondiale

Avant d'être l'événement qui a déterminé l'entrée de l'ironie dans son étape moderne, la Grande Guerre reste un exemple splendide d'ironie du sort. D'abord, parce qu'elle a démolie la confiance multiséculaire de la civilisation occidentale dans le mythe du progrès, étant, selon Paul Fussel, « beaucoup plus ironique que toutes les guerres antérieures ou ultérieures [...] une gêne odieuse face au mythe Mélioratif régnant qui avait dominé la conscience publique [...] Elle a renversé l'Idée de Progrès »⁹, et ensuite parce qu'elle a été perçue comme la dernière (« la der des ders », « the War to end all Wars ») et applaudie par beaucoup d'idéalistes. Publiant en 1921 un essai sur *L'Ironie des choses*, un de ses anciens partisans, l'écrivain autrichien Hugo von Hofmannsthal, allait reconnaître que la Grande Guerre n'avait été qu'une énorme ironie de l'histoire et de la géographie qui avait institué partout dans le monde l'autorité d'un « soleil noir » : « Nous nous trouvons en plein milieu d'une véritable comédie – ou plus exactement, sous le coup d'une ironie si universelle qu'aucune comédie ne l'a jamais mise en scène [...] cette puissance ironique des choses est particulièrement ressentie par les vaincus »¹⁰. Mais les vaincus de la guerre n'étaient pas seulement ceux qui avaient perdu la bataille, mais tous ceux qui avaient perdu pour toujours leur confiance dans la capacité de l'humanité de bâtir un avenir meilleur que le présent sacrifié.

⁸ Pierre Schoentjes, *Poétique de l'ironie*, Paris, Seuil, 2001, *passim*.

⁹ Paul Fussel, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1975, p. 8.

¹⁰ Hugo von Hofmannsthal, « L'ironie des choses », texte publié comme *appendix* en traduction française par Pierre Schoentjes, « Image de la Grande Guerre en Sainte Farce », in Eléonore Faivre d'Arcier, Jean-Paul Madou, Laurent Van Eynde (dir.), *Mythe et création. Théorie, figures*, Bruxelles, Facultés universitaires Saint-Louis, 2005, p. 182.

En mesure d'expliquer pourquoi dans certaines cultures européennes « l'ironie apparaît comme la structure essentielle de toute écriture de la guerre »¹¹, cet enthousiasme n'a pas caractérisé l'état d'esprit des Roumains, car, à l'opposé de l'optimisme montré par les occidentaux, la Grande Guerre a représenté pour les pays balkaniques la source d'une grande inquiétude :

Intéressant et digne d'être discuté a été l'état d'esprit de petits pays, particulièrement des pays balkaniques, où on ne voit pas se manifester le même enthousiasme provoqué par la guerre. Comme d'habitude, les Roumains, les Bulgares, les Grecs, les Serbes ont peur. Ils étaient à peine sortis des confrontations militaires balkaniques¹².

Ayant la conviction que toute guerre, même de moindre envergure, génère des tragédies incommensurables et sans aucune confiance dans la capacité de leur pays de garder sa place sur la carte géopolitique régionale, les Roumains ont donc reçu avec réticence la nouvelle de l'éclatement de la Grande Guerre – une réticence traduite aussi par les deux années de neutralité du Royaume. Même quand ils ont milité pour l'entrée du pays en guerre, les Roumains ne l'ont pas fait avec l'exaltation des occidentaux qui croyaient aux vertus curatifs du conflit, mais avec la conscience d'un sacrifice nécessaire à la reconquête de l'unité territoriale et ethnique du peuple. La correspondance des combattants roumains, publiée par Mirela Florian, confirme l'attitude réservée des soldats par rapport à la guerre : « Il n'y avait plus l'enthousiasme de 1913, car on savait tous que cette guerre sera terrible et longue, étant donnée l'amplitude des forces armées dont les deux camps disposaient »¹³. Tandis que les soldats de la Triple Entente pensaient, en 1914, qu'ils allaient revenir chez eux jusqu'à Noël, les soldats roumains, déçus par la campagne de Bulgarie et peut-être par le paysage funeste des deux premières années de la Grande Guerre, partageaient une vision sceptique sur la mobilisation.

En conséquence, l'ironie qui commence à surgir dans la poésie des écrivains roumains combattants dans la Grande Guerre devrait être lue comme expression de la méfiance par rapport aux défis de l'histoire et non pas comme expression de la confiance trahie par ses promesses. Sans être dominante dans la création d'un poète en particulier, l'ironie reste une constante dans les vers de tous les poètes de front. Chez Ion Pillat (1891–1945), elle se dresse contre *le destin* qui manipule

¹¹ Luc Resson, *Écrire contre la guerre : littérature et pacifismes. 1916–1938*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 1997, p. 21.

¹² Liviu Maior, *Doi ani mai devreme. Ardeleni, bucovineni și basarabeni în război. 1914–1916 [Deux ans plus tôt. Habitants de la Transylvanie, de la Bucovine et de la Bessarabie en guerre. 1914–1916]*, Cluj-Napoca, Școala Ardeleană, 2016, p. 8.

¹³ Stan Iliescu, « Impresii și întâmplări văzute de mine ca participant la acest războiu, cu Regimentul de Căi Ferate » [« Impressions et événements vus par moi-même comme participant à cette guerre, avec le Régiment de Voies Ferrées »], in Mirela Florian (coord.), *Scrisori de pe front [Lettres du front]*, București, Martor, 2017, p. 210.

inconsciemment les vies des gens transformés en pions d'un jeu tragique: « Quel enfant-dieu se penche vers les hommes-jouets/ Et renverse le soir ses poupées de cire/ Les enterrant dans les boîtes noires des tranchées ? » (*Soldați de plumb* [*Soldats de plomb*]¹⁴), tandis que chez Adrian Maniu (1891–1968) l'ironie vise la divinité qui tolère les horreurs de la guerre, indifférente face aux souffrances des innocents, ce qui conduit à réaffirmer la mort de Dieu : « Marie, ne cherche plus ton enfant/ Ton fils est mort pour nous tous » (*Târziu de tot* [*Si tard*]¹⁵). Une méfiance ironique dans l'autorité divine incapable de sauver le monde prend aussi contour dans la poésie de Ion Vinea [1895–1964], qui recompose la prière du Seigneur, Notre-Père: « –Vanité/ Fais-nous le sourire forcé/ Et donne-nous aujourd'hui notre pain de ce jour » (*Tatăl nostru* [*Notre-Père*]¹⁶), et également dans celle de Demostene Botez (1893–1973), qui reprend certains épisodes bibliques significatifs pour souligner que les miracles salvateurs ne peuvent plus se produire: « Aucun Lazare ne reviendra à la vie aujourd'hui/ Ni par miracle l'aveugle ne retrouvera pas sa vue/ Car la terre n'est qu'une simple boue/ Et Tomas ne te croira plus » (*Crist* [*Christ*]¹⁷). La poésie devient ainsi chez ces auteurs une sorte de réécriture à rebours de la narration biblique.

Mais les réalités du *front* constituent aussi des cibles pour l'ironie des poètes roumains combattants, puisque la misère des tranchées ne peut pas non plus être ignorée par ceux-ci. Par exemple, Avram Steuerman-Rodion (1872–1918), poète roumain d'origine juive qui va se suicider à la fin du conflit, surprend souvent dans ses sonnets de guerre les paradoxes ironiques du conflit moderne : « Ça fait des heures que quatre pelleteurs travaillent/ À remuer et couvrir la tranchée/ Attaque moderne, moderne l'épopée/ Aéroplane, tranchées, trous et poteaux » (*În fața tranșeei* [*Devant la tranchée*]¹⁸). Une autre réalité du front, telle que les soldats la perçoivent, c'est la banalité de la mort, dévoilée avec résignation cynique par Camil Petrescu (1894–1957) dans ses poèmes de guerre remarquables pour la formule transitive qu'ils développent dans une sorte de synchronisation avec le

¹⁴ Ion Pillat, *Grădina între ziduri: poezii* [*Jardin entre les murs : poésies*], in *Opere* [*Œuvres*], vol. I, II. *Poezii* [*Poésies*]. Édition, chronologie, notes, tableaux synoptiques, références critiques et préface par Cornelia Pillat, București, Du Style, 2000, p. 345 : « Ce zeu-copil se-apleacă pe oameni-jucării/ Și seara, răsturnându-i în negrele cutii,/ Îngroapă în tranșee păpușile de ceară ? ».

¹⁵ Adrian Maniu, *Cântece de dragoste și moarte* [*Chants d'amour et de mort*], in *Versuri* [*Vers*]. Édition, postface et bibliographie par G. Gheorghiuță, București, Minerva, 1979, p. 238 : « Marie, nu-ți mai căuta băiatu/ Fiul tău a murit pentru noi toți ».

¹⁶ Ion Vinea, *Opere*, vol. I. *Poezii* [*Poésies*]. Édition par Elena Zaharia Filipaș, București, Minerva, 1984, p. 181 : « – Fă-ne, Deșertăciune, zâmbetul poruncit/ și pâinea ta cea de toate zilele/ dă-ne-o nouă azi ».

¹⁷ Demostene Botez, *Floarea pământului* [*La fleur de la terre*], Iași, Viața Românească, 1920, p. 128 : « Azi nici un Lazăr n-o să mai învie,/ Nici prin miracol orbul nu mai vede/ Iar tina e o simplă murdărie/ Și Toma nici acum nu te crede ».

¹⁸ Avram Steuerman-Rodion, *Frontul roșu. Sonete postume* [*Le front rouge. Sonnets posthumes*], Iași, Institutul de Arte Grafice „Viața Românească”, 1920, p. 19 : « Muncesc, de ceasuri, patru lopătari/ Să sape și s'acopere tranșeea./ Atac modern, modernă epopeea:/ Aeroplan, tranșee, gropi și pari ».

rythme anodin des événements: « Sois prêt, ami soldat, sois prêt/ Nettoie attentivement ton arme et ta pelle/ Et met ta croix au cou/ Demain il y aura une grande attaque,/ Et c'est tout.// [...] O, encore une fois, t'as assez de temps ;/ N'aie pas peur./ Ce soir on recevra du thé et des craquelins/ Tue ton âme en avance,/ Pour pouvoir manger tranquillement./ (Le thé aide à ne pas geler.) » (*Versuri pentru ziua de atac* [*Des vers pour la journée d'attaque*]¹⁹). Parfois, l'ironie se dresse aussi contre les civils, particulièrement contre les femmes – dont la fragilité émotionnelle passe pour jeu théâtral aux yeux d'un poète combattant comme Perpessicius (1891–1971) : « Laisse le vin/ noyer tes larmes/ dans les verres, ma Lily :/ Crois-tu que tes larmes, chérie/ Arrêteront à la douane/ Notre ennemi? » (*Ajun de evacuare* [*Veille de l'évacuation*]²⁰) – ou contre les traîtres, comme dans les vers satiriques du poète Octavian Goga (1881–1938), contre la monarchie ou contre certaines personnalités de la vie intellectuelle durant les deux années de neutralité de la Roumanie, quand la Transylvanie, sa région natale, appartenait encore à l'Empire Austro-Hongrois²¹.

Ironies poétiques des civils durant la Seconde Guerre Mondiale

Si la pratique ironique peut être identifiée dans les créations des poètes combattants dans la Grande Guerre, elle va se développer aussi, à l'occasion de la Seconde Guerre mondiale, surtout dans la poésie des civils. Cela n'est pas dû au fait que la deuxième conflagration ait choqué moins la sensibilité collective (étant donné qu'elle a compté un nombre cinq fois plus grand de victimes que la Grande Guerre), mais à ce que le nombre des écrivains enrôlés s'est considérablement réduit : selon Paul Fussel, « si la loquacité a été un des traits de la Grande Guerre – pensons à tous les poètes et mémorialistes des tranchées – quelque chose synonyme au silence s'est dégagé de l'expérience de la Seconde Guerre Mondiale »²². Les causes de ce silence sont nombreuses, parmi elles se trouvant la perte de l'idéalisme d'autrefois, qui avait déterminé les mobilisations volontaires

¹⁹ Camil Petrescu, *Versuri. Ideia. Ciclul morții* [*Vers. L'idée. Le cycle de la mort*], in *Opere* [*Œuvres*], vol. I. *Versuri* [*Vers*]. Édition par Al. Rosetti et Liviu Călin, București, Editura pentru Literatură, 1968, pp. 19-22 : « Fii gata, prietene soldat, fii gata/ Curăță-ți cu grijă arma și lopata/ Și pune-ți cruciulița la gât/ Măine va fi un atac mare,/ Și-atât.// [...] O, înc-o dată, ai tot timpul;/ Nu te teme./ Diseară ne vor da ceai și pesmeți./ Omoară-ți sufletul de vreme,/ Ca să poți mânca liniștit. (Ceaiul e bun ca să nu îngheți) ».

²⁰ Perpessicius, *Scut și targă: poezii* [*Bouclier et civière*], in *Opere* [*Œuvres*], vol. I. *Poezii* [*Poésies*], București, Editura pentru Literatură, 1966, p. 62 : « Lasă lacrimile tale/ Să le-nece, Lily, vinul/ Din pahare :/ Crezi că plânsetele tale/ Vor opri cumva străinul/ la hotare? ».

²¹ Corina Croitoru, « Combattants-poètes et poètes combattants dans la Roumanie de la Grande Guerre », *Romania Orientale*, XXVIII, 2015, pp. 172-173.

²² Paul Fussel, *À la guerre. Psychologie et comportements pendant la Seconde Guerre mondiale*. Traduit de l'américain par Paul Chemla, Paris, Seuil, 1992, p. 167.

antérieures, mais aussi la diminution du rôle du texte écrit par rapport aux nouveaux médias, à côté d'un changement de stratégie militaire. Il s'agit d'une nouvelle approche qui a permis aux écrivains d'occuper des places stratégiques dans le système politique et administratif durant la guerre, même dans l'appareil de propagande, afin d'éviter l'expérience du combat direct. Dans la culture roumaine, il y a eu, bien évidemment, des exceptions à cette règle générale, comme, par exemple, celle du poète Radu Gyr (1905–1975), condamné sous trois dictatures (du roi Charles II, du maréchal Ion Antonescu et des communistes) pour son activité légionnaire²³ et envoyé sur le front en 1941, pour son « rétablissement » politique. Vu cette biographie troublée, ses poèmes cultivent une ironie amère et parfois une tonalité tragique, mais sans ressentiments, contemplant avec impuissance le tableau funeste de la guerre en tant que combattant sur le front, mais aussi en tant que civil dans la capitale bombardée en 1944 : « Mon vieux, cette nuit ton génie/ a porté par-dessous les étoiles glorieuses/ de tonnes de chimie grandiose,/ de tonnes de science de la mort. // Mon vieux, cette nuit ton génie/ a versé de l'enfer synthétique dans l'espace/ sur tes anciennes créations/ de granit, d'idées et de vie... » (*Omule, geniul tău astă-noapte* [*Mon vieux, cette nuit ton génie*]²⁴).

Par contre, la poétique des civils est d'une nature très différente, car des poètes comme Geo Dumitrescu, Dimitrie Stelaru, Ion Caraion et d'autres représentants de la « génération de la guerre » et notamment du groupe bucarestois « Albatros » thématisent l'événement à travers une ironie combative, caractérisée par la distance humoristique ou cynique du sujet par rapport à son objet. Assez éloignée de l'ironie désenchantée des poètes combattants dans la Grande Guerre, mais aussi de l'ironie néoromantique de leurs contemporains regroupés au Cercle Littéraire de Sibiu, leur ironie est avant tout contestataire. Elle se construit dans un registre anti-lyrique, transitif, dénotatif et référentiel, pour dévoiler soit le manque de confiance dans l'avenir de l'espèce humaine, chez Geo Dumitrescu (1920–2004) : « Il y a deux mille ans qu'on ne fait rien –/ vive la guerre ! – nous sommes des gens avec doctrine et mépris pour la mort :/ contre le 'général pellagre' et pour un siècle meilleur/ oh, l'ingénieur, un tube d'oxygène pour notre alliée, la planète Mars ! » (*Pelagră* [*Pellagre*]²⁵), soit la répétition absurde des erreurs de l'histoire

²³ Orientation d'extrême droite dans la Roumanie de l'entre-deux-guerres.

²⁴ Radu Gyr, *Crucea din stepă. Poeme de războiu* [*La croix dans la steppe. Poèmes de guerre*]. Édition par Barbu Cioculescu et Ioan Popișteanu, Contanța, Ex Ponto, 1998, p. 63 : « Omule, geniul tău astă-noapte/ a cărat pe sub stele în slavă/ tone întregi de chimie grozavă,/ tone întregi de știință a morții.// Omule, geniul tău astă-noapte/ a turnat iad sintetic în spații/ peste vechile tale creații/ de granit, de idei și de viață... ».

²⁵ Geo Dumitrescu, *Libertatea de a trage cu pușca* [*La liberté de tirer au fusil*], București, Fundația Regală pentru Literatură și Artă, 1946, p. 53 : « De două mii de ani nu facem nimic –/ trăiască războiul! – suntem oameni cu doctrină și cu dispreț de moarte:/ împotriva „generalului pelagră” și pentru un veac mai bun,/ hei, inginer, o conductă de oxigen pentru aliata noastră Marte ! ».

qui stratifie les victimes une génération après l'autre : « Dans un trou noir, peut-être même dans un cimetière / les gens, mes amis armés [...] comptaient leurs balles et espéraient une attaque nocturne [...] en discutant sur la liberté de tirer au fusil/ [...] Parallèlement, en dessous, des gens dormaient leur éternité –/ et discutaient eux aussi sur la liberté de tirer au fusil après chaque carnage » (*Libertatea de a trage cu pușca* [*La liberté de tirer au fusil*]²⁶). À son tour, la poésie de Dimitrie Stelaru (1917–1971) repose sur la même ironie contre la nature humaine incorrigible dont le progrès civilisationnel n'est qu'une régression spirituelle et morale : « Qui est en uniforme ? Demande la civilisation,/ ensanglantée, la civilisation demande,/ – Les bêtes ! Dit l'ombre. Les bêtes ! / Cherchiez-vous autre chose ? » (*Fiarele* [*Les bêtes*]²⁷), tandis que les créations de Ion Caraion (1923–1986) dévoilent avec amertume ironique le rôle-fantôme du poète en temps de détresse : « Il serait ridicule de penser à autre chose qu'à la guerre./ Là il faut des gens forts, des chariots d'assaut, du maïs, / et non pas des machines à coudre silencieusement les mots » (*Motiv* [*Motif*]²⁸). Même quand la condition du poète semble s'esquisser apparemment sans référence directe au contexte historique, comme dans un autoportrait lyrique de Constant Tonegaru (1919–1952), le langage trahit ironiquement la contamination avec l'imaginaire de la guerre : « Je suis le condottiere Tonegaru sans épée;/ je l'ai émoussée en taillant mon dernier crayon/ pour écrire comment j'ai attaqué la poésie à la grenade » (*Cântec pe hârtie* [*Cântec pe hârtie*]²⁹). Autrement, la présence même de l'ironie dans un genre littéraire reconnu pour son ineffable est, en fin de compte, une sorte d'« attaque » contre le modèle antérieur de poéticité, qui envisageait un signe d'équivalence entre vers et lyrisme.

Ironie de et contre la guerre... et après ?

À la lumière de tous ces exemples auxquels pourraient se rajouter beaucoup d'autres, la pratique de l'*ironie moderne*, éthique, engagée par rapport à

²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 54 : « În groapa neagră, poate chiar într-un cimitir,/ oamenii, prietenii mei înarmați [...] își numărau gloanțele și zilele și nădăduiau un atac peste noapte [...] discutând despre libertatea de a trage cu pușca,/ [...] Paralel cu noi, dedesubt, oameni își dormeau veșnicia –/ și ei discutați despre libertatea de a trage cu pușca, după fiecare măcel ».

²⁷ Dimitrie Stelaru, *Coloane* [*Colonnes*], București, Minerva, 1970, p. 351 : « Cine stă în uniformă? Întreabă civilizația,/ însângerață, civilizația întreabă,/ căutând întreabă civilizația./ - Fiarele! Spune umbra. Fiarele! Căutați altceva? ».

²⁸ Ion Caraion, *Poeme* [*Poèmes*], București, Albatros, 1974, p. 20 : « Ar fi ridicol să te poți gândi la altceva decât la război./ Acum trebuie oameni puternici, care de asalt, păpușoi,/ nu aparate de cusut cuvintele în gând ».

²⁹ Constant Tonegaru, *Plantații* [*Plantations*], in *Plantația de cuie* [*La plantation de clous*]. Édition, étude critique, notes et variantes par Barbu Cioculescu, București, Vinea, 2003, p. 76 : « Sunt condottierul Tonegaru fără spadă;/ mi-am tocit-o ascuțindu-mi ultimul creion/ să scriu cum am dat în poezie cu o grenadă ».

l'événementiel, apparaît comme une figure discursive récurrente dans la poésie roumaine des deux guerres mondiales. Elle naît dans les vers des poètes combattants dans la Grande Guerre et se développe ensuite dans les créations des poètes civils de la Seconde Guerre mondiale, mais son odyssée ne s'arrête pas là, car l'ironie est une stratégie discursive oblique, parfaitement adaptable à une écriture sous contrainte. C'est pourquoi elle deviendra dans la littérature roumaine de la période communiste une des armes privilégiées des poètes dans le combat ésoptique avec le pouvoir politique dictatorial, une nouvelle guerre, « d'usure », avec les injustices de l'Histoire.

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WHEN THE IRONY OF THE ROMANIAN POETS STAND UP AGAINST WAR (Abstract)

Dedicated to the Romanian poetry inspired by the experience of the two World Wars, the article traces the development of *modern irony* – ethically engaged against the realities of trench warfare and against the context that made them possible – in the verses of combatant poets and in those of civilians. The goal of the approach is to outline the evolution of this oblique discursive strategy in the Romanian poetry, under the pressure exerted by the events of the first half of 20th century, before becoming an Aesopian literary practice during Communism.

Keywords: World War I, World War II, irony, Romanian poetry, combatant poets.

CÂND IRONIA POETILOR ROMÂNI SE OPUNE RĂZBOIULUI (Rezumat)

Dedicat poeziei românești inspirate de experiența celor două războaie mondiale, articolul urmărește modul în care atât în versurile poetilor combatanți, cât și în cele ale poetilor civili se dezvoltă o *ironie modernă*, angajată etic împotriva realităților frontului și a contextului istoric care le-a făcut posibile. Obiectivul demersului este acela de a contura evoluția acestei strategii discursive oblice în poezia românească, sub presiunea exercitată de factorul evenimential în prima jumătate a secolului XX, înainte de a deveni o practică literară esopică în perioada comunistă.

Cuvinte-cheie: Primul Război Mondial, Al Doilea Război Mondial, ironie, poezie română, poeți combatanți.

SWIFTIAN IRONY AND THE ROMANIAN NOVEL

This paper focuses on the use of Swiftian irony in two Romanian novels: *Gulliver în țara minciunilor* [*Gulliver in the Country of Lies*] by Ion Eremia¹ and *Călătorie în Capricia* [*A Journey to Capricia*] by Mircea Opriță². The influence of the troubled political environment in Eastern Europe during the twentieth century informs the intertextual relation between these three novels. The intertextual analysis has two levels: the ironical use of the Swiftian travelogue by the two Romanian novelists and the (Swiftian) irony within the two novels authored by Ion Eremia and Mircea Opriță. This intertextual relationship is also integrated within the international scholarship on Swiftian irony.

The statement that Jonathan Swift is considered a master of irony is a common place in many literary histories or even literary textbooks. Still, the critical literature about Swift, the ironist, is not very rich. Eleanor Hutchens distinguishes irony “from other kinds of deceptive acts”³ of literature. Basically, irony is “the sport of bringing about a conclusion by indicating its opposite”⁴, irony is an “understatement, which achieves emphasis by denying”⁵ its rhetorical power. Irony

¹ Ion Eremia (1913–2004) was a Romanian officer who fought in World War II both on the East and the West front (Romania fought against the Soviet Union from 1941 until 1944 and against Nazi Germany from 1944 till 1945). After World War II had ended and Romania entered the orbit of the Soviet Union, Eremia became a general and was even promoted Vice-Minister of National Defence. In 1956 Eremia was purged as a consequence of his critical attitude towards the new authorities. Disappointed and bitter, he wrote the fierce satire *Gulliver în țara minciunilor* [*Gulliver in the Country of Lies*] between 1956 and 1958. Eremia tried to send his manuscript to France where he had been promised that the book would be published in translation. This allegorical text was meant to be a message from behind the Iron Curtain about the realities of the new Communist world. The writer was denounced, the manuscript was confiscated by the Securitate (the Romanian political police), and the author was arrested in 1958. Beaten to death and submitted to the worst possible tortures during the inquest, he was sentenced to a twenty-five years’ prison sentence for treason and “plotting against the state order”. In 1964 Eremia was released from prison thanks to a general political amnesty. The manuscript was returned to the author only in 1990, upon his request. It was under the new political circumstances after the collapse of the Communist system, at the end of 1989 that this book could be published. It immediately attracted the attention of the literary critics as it was a great sample of the so-called “desk drawer literature” (literature that could not be published under the Communist regime because of censorship).

² Mircea Opriță was born in 1943. He has a university degree in Philology from Babeș-Bolyai University (1966) and a doctorate on the utopian discourse from the same university (1998). He has worked for Dacia Publishing House, and for the Romanian Cultural Institute in Budapest. Opriță is one of the most important representatives of the Romanian SF.

³ Eleanor N. Hutchens, “The Identification of Irony”, *ELH*, 27, 1960, December, 4, p. 353.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 358.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 362.

relies on “the juxtaposition or the interplay of opposites; and to insist on this is also to reverse the normal laws of causal connection”⁶. David Holdcroft considers irony to be both a trope and a discourse, “an expression of an ironist’s attitude to the world”⁷. Theoretically, Holdcroft relies on Grice and his notion of the Constructive Principle of the discourse and sentence (CP). Questioning is one of the ironist’s most powerful weapons and consequently, “he does not adhere to the spirit of CP”⁸, hence irony “can be at the same time subversive, destructive, and infuriating”⁹.

Many scholars prefer to combine the analysis of satire and irony rather indistinctly, irony being considered, at best, a tool to achieve satire¹⁰. For instance, Linderman emphasizes Swift’s indebtedness to the Menippean satire, irony being one of its tools in the sample text *Tale of a Tub*¹¹. Richard Nash also analyses Swiftian irony in *Tale of a Tub* and comes to the conclusion that there are two ironic modes: the narrative one and the allegorical one. The narrative mode requires “the reader to distinguish truth from the erroneous utterance of a narrator”¹², whereas the allegorical one requires “the reader to recognize a metaphoric truth implied by the text”¹³. Nash emphasizes that in both cases irony “requires the reader to participate actively in the text’s creation of meaning in a manner that conforms to the meaning being created”¹⁴. It is clear that Eremia’s and Opriță’s use of the allegorical ironic modes helps the reader create meaning that is important for the understanding of the reality where these writers found their inspiration. The problem is to what extent they succeeded in surpassing the constraints of their inspiring reality and give food for thought and meaning to next generations of readers.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 362.

⁷ David Holdcroft, “Irony as a Trope, and Irony as Discourse”, *Poetics Today*, 4, 1983, 3, p. 508.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 511.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 511.

¹⁰ An unfortunate example of superficial scholarship about Swift’s irony and its connection with satire is Elena Țărălungă Tamura, “Jonathan Swift’s Satire and Irony”, *The Economic Journal of Takasaki City University of Economics*, 46, 2003, 3, pp. 129-135. Elena Țărălungă Tamura mentions that Swift “draws with caustic irony an idealized picture of the English social and political institutions” (p. 133) but gives no explanatory details. The ironical destiny of Swift’s novel which turned from “one of the most powerful attacks ever made against man’s wickedness and stupidity” (p. 135) into “a charming book of adventure popular with children” (p. 135) is fugitively mentioned, but the author does not try to find any explanation of the infantilization/ minorisation of Swift’s book. Unless otherwise stated, the quotations are translated into English by the author of this paper.

¹¹ Deborah Linderman, “Self-Transforming Ironies in Swifts *Tale of a Tub*”, *Comparative Literature Studies*, 16, 1979, March, 1, pp. 69-78.

¹² Richard Nash, “Entrapment and Ironic Modes in *Tale of a Tub*”, *Eighteenth Century Studies*, 24, 1991, 4, p. 416.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 416.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 431.

Satire and irony are interchangeable according to Dyson's essay "Swift: The Metamorphosis of Irony". Although Dyson analyses irony only in Book 4 of *Gulliver's Travels*, his conclusions are worthwhile. Both irony and satire serve a moral purpose and they are meant to mend the world. Irony is an increasingly important element during the four voyages of Gulliver but in Book 4, the voyage to the country of the rational horses, irony is no longer a verbal device, it becomes a structural principle with an important existential function. Irony "ceases to be a functional technique serving a moral purpose and becomes an embodiment of an attitude to life"¹⁵. If we follow Gulliver's four voyages, Swift's irony gets more and more pessimistic and points to the real "world's essential unmendability"¹⁶. Irony "communicates a tragic sense of life which is no longer supported by a strong belief in any universal and uncompromised values"¹⁷. Dyson considers Swift the tutor of two other great ironists of British literature: Aldous Huxley and Samuel Butler and this statement could be extended to world literature. In my opinion, after the 1950's Swift became the great tutor of two Romanian authors, Ion Eremia and Mircea Opriță

Irvin Ehrenpreis has also noticed the connection between satire and irony. Namely, Swift "writes the opposite of what he means, in a tone which indicates the real intention. But he can also be ironic about an irony"¹⁸. Ehrenpreis acknowledges that malleability has made Gulliver attractive for other writers' intertextual exercises: "Moderately successful, infused with the ordinary bourgeois ambitions, benevolent and hopeful toward man, boastful about his native land and about European civilization, he has an irresistible attraction for the reader's fantasies of identification. After going through the opening episodes, one becomes Gulliver"¹⁹. This is exactly what happened to both Eremia and Opriță.

Walter Bliss Carnochan recognizes that the scholars "have trouble disentangling the idea of satire from the ironic procedures of the satirists: satire and irony (we think) just go together. Irony is the indirection that converts criticism to satire. But is there any reason behind what looks like a dependency relationship?"²⁰. Carnochan considers irony a verbal device which is connected to satire by its simultaneity. Irony "is the simultaneous assertion and denial of the existence of opposites. Simultaneity is of the essence of irony which fuses what we can only say consecutively: "not-p implies p ... p implies not-p"²¹. In this way,

¹⁵ Anthony Edward Dyson, "Swift: The Metamorphosis of Irony" in *Essays and Studies*, vol. 11, London, John Murray, 1958, p. 54.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 58.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 67.

¹⁸ Irvin Ehrenpreis, "Swift and Satire", *College English*, 13, 1952, March, 6, p. 309.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 312.

²⁰ Walter Bliss Carnochan, "Swift's Tale: On Satire, Negation, and the Uses of Irony", *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 5, 1971, 1, pp. 123-124.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 143.

irony “is a creating of the timeless world, a sort of paradise, though of course the mockery of paradise, too”²². The Houyhnhnms’ idealized mode of life needed the mocking opposition of the Yahoos. Eremia’s or Oprea’s realms also need an idealizing and mocking counterpart. In Carnochan’s words: “the mutual implication of opposites and the consequence that both are true, is the ironist’s life-blood”²³. Swift’s irony “is the satirist’s rhetorical victory in the presence of self-defeat”²⁴. Satirists Eremia and Oprea were able to win that victory.

Daniel Eilon connects satire and irony on the basis of stylistic parsimony. The ironic style – Swift being one of its most important representatives – “is thrifty in its allowance of signals and guidance”²⁵, this efficient stylistic sobriety characterizes Eremia’s and Oprea’s writing. Eilon also notices that irony “defines two communities: those who fall for it and those who are on it”²⁶. Swiftian irony is characterized, according to Eilon, by some similarity with the bite: “the linguistic practical joke that deliberately manufactures this kind of embarrassing situation so as to enjoy the privileged satisfaction of irony: ‘Pity to the Ignorant’”²⁷. Although irony “is a trope whose rhetorical effect depends upon the audience’s desire to ally themselves with the elite speaker, lest they be counted among the vulgar”²⁸, Swift’s irony is particular because the “clubs, cabals, sects, ‘families’ (in the Mafia sense of the term), professions, and parties that Swift attacked are unions of interest and privilege. Their closure defines them. Swift’s irony... forms a meritocracy rather than an aristocracy”²⁹. Eremia’s and Oprea’s Swiftian irony forms a readership that condemns tyranny and warns about the possibility of tyranny to return.

The scholarship on irony cannot omit the canonized critic Frank Raymond Leavis who analysed Swift’s irony in a well-known article published in 1967. Although the title of the article announces that the critic’s focus is irony, in fact the article rather deals with satire than irony³⁰ with Leavis announcing the latent death of political satire: “He [Swift] will, of course, be aware of an ingenuity of political satire in ‘Lilliput’, but the political satire is, unless for historians, not very much alive today”³¹.

²² *Ibidem*, p. 143.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 142.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 124.

²⁵ Daniel Eilon, “Swift’s Satiric Logic: On Parsimony, Irony, and Antinomian Fiction”, *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 1988, 8, p. 25.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 35.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 35.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 36.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 36.

³⁰ Leavis is not an exception. Several other critics mix irony and satire.

³¹ Frank Raymond Leavis, “The Irony of Swift”, in *Fair Liberty Was All His Cry*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 1967, p. 117. Nowadays in 2021 we can only agree with Leavis. Derision is not absent

Swift's Use of Irony by Herbert John Davis tackles irony in relation with Defoe and historicity: "[S]ome problems in the interpretation of irony may become more difficult with the passage of centuries"³². Change of morals and ideas because of history and the influence of time passage may make aspects of Swiftian irony difficult to assess and appreciate three hundred years later. The historicity of the moment when Eremia and Opriță wrote their ironical travelogues influenced the creation of these texts and it will always affect their reception. The historical reference point that connects but also separates the two novels is the anti-totalitarian revolution of December 1989. The plot of Eremia's text occurs before and during the revolution, the plot of Opriță's text occurs after the revolution that gave people so much hope. The ironical conclusion is that the revolution does not bring something necessarily better, but it does bring something less bad.

The historicity of irony³³ is explained by Frank Stringfellow from a psychoanalytical point of view. Irony is a device which deals with two verbal levels: what is said and what is meant, the conscious and the unconscious.³⁴ Consequently, the analysis of irony must go beyond the verbal level and find the rich ambiguities of this verbal device in the unconscious meaning hidden in our mind. As our mind develops according to the historical and the social environment, irony has a powerful historical content.

Rolf Breuer also relies on a psychological approach to irony, more precisely he scrutinizes it in relationship with schizophrenia. Breuer considers that there are two types of irony: classical irony and tragic irony or the irony of fate: "In classical irony, a proposition does not mean that which, according to its wording, one would expect it to mean; in fact it often means the opposite"³⁵. Tragic irony or the irony of fate results from "the experience of the discrepancy between intention and result, between means and end"³⁶. In other words, irony has a ludic character, it is "a game played with the levels of interaction, such that contradictions are combined, and mutual exclusions exist simultaneously. It is the paradoxical response to a paradoxical situation, similarly, schizophrenia is a contradictory response to a contradictory situation"³⁷. Schizophrenia presupposes the creation of a world in itself. Exactly in the same way, "a work of art is a universe in itself, which follows its own laws and cannot therefore be judged by standards extrinsic

from Romanian public life, but it manifests mainly by mockery, banter, and gross caricature. Irony is scarce, subtle irony even more so.

³² Herbert John Davis, "Swift's Use of Irony", in Earl Miner (ed.), *Stuart and Georgian Moments*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1972, p. 221.

³³ Already noticed by F. R. Leavis.

³⁴ Frank Stringfellow, *The Meaning of Irony: A Psychoanalytic Investigation*, Albany, University of New York Press, 1994.

³⁵ Rolf Breuer, "Irony, Literature, and Schizophrenia", *New Literary History*, 12, 1980, 1, p. 109.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 111.

³⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 111.

to it”³⁸. In the ironical exercise, there is simultaneity between surface and depth, form and content, mask and face. This “implies that irony may be the only legitimate form of communication for the artist at certain times. This is because it is irony alone, as a form of schizophrenia, which reconstructs the discrepancy between means and end, form and content, agent and act”³⁹. In *A Modest Proposal* Swift uses such a schizophrenic procedure where “irony is awareness of the gulf between world and self”⁴⁰. There is a connection between schizophrenia and irony because “literature cannot be understood merely in terms of itself, divorced from the environment which gives rise to it or to which it is a reaction”⁴¹. Consequently, “schizophrenia becomes the appropriate form of experiencing reality, irony the only legitimate principle”⁴².

Denis Donoghue starts from Leavis’s article on irony and emphasizes the existence of a span of time between the said irony and the understood irony⁴³. This delay empowers the ironist:

The delay between the utterance and its being understood corresponds to a certain subjective freedom. The ironist, since he does not coincide with his meaning, has within his power the possibility of a beginning which is not “generated from previous conditions”. The ironist masters every moment by travelling incognito. The purpose of irony is to enable the ironist to feel free to move in any direction he chooses: he is not intimidated by any object in view⁴⁴.

As a consequence of this freedom, “irony is a risky business because one cannot at all be certain that readers will be directed to the ironic meanings one intends”⁴⁵.

Breuer’s and Donoghue’s approach to irony can help us understand Swiftian irony as well as the way in which Eremia and Oprea put Swiftian irony to efficient use in order to respond to the needs of different historical periods. With both Romanian authors, the discrepancy in time and the discrepancy between reality and the reality fictionalized according to the “schizophrenic” recipe can be better grasped relying on Breuer and Donoghue.

Wayne Booth considers that verbal ironies can be divided into two categories: stable and unstable. The former are “interpretable, with some stopping point in the

³⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 112.

³⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 114.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 115.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, p. 116.

⁴² *Ibidem*, pp. 116-117.

⁴³ Donoghue refers to the historicity of enunciation and not to the historicity of the context where the enunciation is made.

⁴⁴ Denis Donoghue, “Swift and the Association of Ideas”, *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 1988, 18, p. 7.

⁴⁵ Stanley Fish, “Short People Got No Reason to Live: Reading Irony”, *Daedalus*, 112, 1983, 1, p. 176.

act of interpretation"⁴⁶, the latter are characterized by a hermeneutical act that is "inherently, deliberately endless"⁴⁷. According to Booth, "when a clever ironist manages to hook us, we come closer than at any other time to a *full identification of two minds*"⁴⁸. Irony is like an "intellectual dance"⁴⁹ that brings us to "tight bonding with the ironist... following the tight web of his or her mental processes"⁵⁰. This is why irony is a history dependent interpretation, hence its frequent instability⁵¹.

Wayne's strategy to understand/produce irony is deftly commented upon by Stanley Fish who insists on the role of the interpretative community: "Thus, when a community of readers agrees that a work, or a part of a work is ironic, that argument will have come about because the community has been persuaded to a set of assumptions, to a way of reading, that produces the ironic meanings to all of its members... irony is a way of reading"⁵².

Douglas Colin Muecke first dealt with irony in his study *Irony and the Ironic*. He starts from the importance of this verbal device because of the very nature of literature: "Literature, with language as its medium, is inescapably ideational"⁵³. He notices that "the concept of irony is vague, unstable and multiform"⁵⁴ and that "irony has basically a corrective function"⁵⁵ which it fulfils relying a lot on the principle of economy⁵⁶. Too many words ruin the irony. In his 1983 article "Images of Irony" Muecke resumes the problem of irony which he considers to be an exercise of power:

Accordingly the archetypal ironist is God because he is omnipotent, omniscient, transcendent, absolute, infinite and free. The archetypal victim is man insofar as he may easily be seen as trapped and submerged in time and matter, blind, contingent,

⁴⁶ Wayne C. Booth, "The Empire of Irony", *The Georgia Review*, 37, 1983, 4, p. 724.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 724.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 729.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 729.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 729.

⁵¹ Swift's own irony can be considered brute and bare and having no philtre, especially nowadays in the age when political correctness led to cancel culture. Remember, for instance, the very crude episode at the end of Gulliver's voyage to the country of the rational horses. He makes his canoe out of yahoo skins. He even insists that he took care to look for skins of younger yahoos as this material is more flexible and more enduring. Gulliver, the colonialist, forgets about any moral principles and the yahoos are othered beyond the level of slavery, they come to be considered to be very valuable raw material. In the twenty-first century, one cannot help wondering: Do the yahoo, abominable as they are, actually deserve this?

⁵² Stanley Fish, "Short", p. 189.

⁵³ Douglas Colin Muecke, *Irony and the Ironic*, London and New York, Routledge, 1982, p. 5.

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 7.

⁵⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 4.

⁵⁶ See *Ibidem*, pp. 52-53.

limited, unfree, the slave of heredity, environment, historical conditioning, instincts, feelings and conscience, while all the time unaware of his being in these prisons⁵⁷.

Like Wayne Booth, Muecke offers researchers a classification of the types of irony:

“Vertical” irony is imagined from the ironist’s point of view, “horizontal” irony from the point of view of an ironist who is also a victim or sees himself as potentially a victim, and “labyrinthine” or “Protean” irony from the point of view of a victim or potential victim who resents not so much his victimization as his loss of contact with the ironist – in other words from the point of view of a victimized reader or critic⁵⁸.

Wayne Booth’s and Muecke’s classification of irony are very helpful to understand Eremia’s and Opriță’s intertextual operations. These Romanian hypertexts rely on stable irony, namely there is a “stopping point in the act of interpretation”⁵⁹. This point is Gulliver. It is on him and with him that all acts of interpretation stop. According to Muecke’s grid, both Romanian ironists apply horizontal irony. They themselves are victims of the intertextual irony as they lived the reality fictionalized in Kukunia or in Capricia. For the moment the interpretative communities of the Romanian ironists are still pretty close to the historical moment that inspired these imaginary travelogues. But it is not impossible that in the future, the interpretative communities will react to other fictional elements. As Fish draws our attention, it is not impossible that the interpretative communities of the future will read irony differently.

Swift’s Gulliver is connected to the utopian trend in English literature. Edward J. Rielly relates Gulliver to Thomas More’s *Utopia* in a very comprehensive article. Firstly, in both books “the irony begins in prefatory material with the sustained pretence that these books record actual journeys by real people, Hythlodæus and Gulliver”⁶⁰. Rielly agrees with Ian Watt that, on one hand, irony calls for an audience of “men of wit”⁶¹ and, on the other hand, irony is for the “literary mob”⁶² who fail “to identify themselves as satiric objects”⁶³. Rielly finds irony in the fact that “Gulliver is as deceived about the Houyhnhnms as Hythlodæus is about the Utopians. That Swift presents the rational horses as superior to the degenerate Yahoos, and a life led according to reason as preferable to a life rooted totally in the senses, seems clear. But those are not the only

⁵⁷ Douglas Colin Muecke, “Images of Irony”, *Poetics Today*, 4, 1983, 3, p. 402. An analysis of *The Book of Job* from the point of view of irony would be most interesting.

⁵⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 412.

⁵⁹ Wayne C. Booth, “The Empire”, p. 724.

⁶⁰ Edward J. Rielly, “Irony in Gulliver’s Travels and Utopia”, *Utopian Studies*, 3, 1992, 1, p. 71.

⁶¹ Ian Watt, “The Ironic Tradition in Augustan Prose from Swift to Johnson”, in Claude Rawson (ed.), *The Character of Swift’s Satire*, Newark, University of Delaware Press, 1983, p. 305.

⁶² *Ibidem*, p. 306.

⁶³ *Ibidem*, p. 306.

alternatives; nor are they the final issues. Is Houyhnhnm society Swift's ideal? This question, a fundamental issue raised by the question, and the answer further establish parallels to More's Utopia"⁶⁴.

The societies presented in Ion Eremia's (dis)topia and in Oprea's *Capricia* have different relations with the ideal of a perfect society. Eremia does not explicitly mention Raphael Hythlodæus as Gulliver's predecessor, but Oprea does. Once shipwrecked on Capricia's shores, Gulliver remembers the honourable Sir Thomas More "who, before being taken to the scaffold, also told stories about an island discovered in the seas that the Europeans had not explored"⁶⁵ and he wonders if "the uncontrollable whims of fortune"⁶⁶ had not carried him in the same direction. Besides introducing an element of fear, this literary reference, which does not appear in the Swiftian text, is an irony to the utopian dreams of Capricia's inhabitants.

Very interesting Swiftian scholarship has been constructed upon a comparative basis. For instance, Katarzyna Bartoszyńska compares Swift's travel to the country of the Houyhnhnms with Krasicki's voyage to the island of Nipu. The latter is the author of the first Polish novel *Mikołaja Doświadczyńskiego przypadki* [*The Adventures of Mr Nicholas Wisdom*], published in 1776. Bartoszyńska starts from the connection between utopian literature and travel writing: "Travel writing is an obvious model for utopian literature: the structure of travel narrative offers the perfect justification for devoting so much attention and detail to the inner workings of a fictional society"⁶⁷. Travelling increases one's ability to educate and enlighten but the irony is "that simply going to a different place does not automatically confer wisdom on the traveller"⁶⁸.

My approach is similar to Bartoszyńska's essay which allows a comparison between Swift's country of rational horses, Eremia's country of lies, and Oprea's Capricia. The Houyhnhnm society is not only a rationally ordered world but also one that is structured around pure logic. The "Houyhnhnm society is theoretically a timeless, universal template. It is not only a rationally ordered world but also one that is structured around pure logic"⁶⁹. The country of lies also relies on a utopia and it becomes a dreamland, or rather a nightmare land, where generous ideas were twisted and betrayed. Capricia's utopia is consumerist. The ideal is to be able to

⁶⁴ Edward J. Rielly, "Irony", p. 78.

⁶⁵ Mircea Oprea, *Călătorie în Capricia. Cu adevărat ultima aventură a lui Gulliver* [*A Journey to Capricia. Gulliver's Truly Last Journey*], București, Eagle Publishing House, 2011, p. 17: "care, înainte de a fi fost dus la eșafod, povestea și el despre o insulă descoperită prin mărele nemaicercetate de europeni".

⁶⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 17: "toanele de nestăpânit ale întâmplării".

⁶⁷ Katarzyna Bartoszyńska, "Persuasive Ironies: Utopian Readings of Swift and Krasicki", *Comparative Literary Studies*, 50, 2013, 4, p. 620.

⁶⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 621.

⁶⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 629.

buy as much as possible and be rich: “The problem with utopian modes of government is their attempt to map out an all-encompassing logical system that will apply universally”⁷⁰. The argument that Swift and Krasicki “make is that when theory and experience collide, the result is disastrous”⁷¹. This argument can be extended to Eremia and Oprîă. In fact, with Swift, irony ultimately becomes “the death blow to utopianism”⁷².

The ironic twist embodied by Swift’s *Gulliver* also hovers on the discussion of colonialism. This aspect of Bartoszynska’s comparison is justified by the very situation of Ireland and Poland when Swift and Krasicki wrote their novels. When *Gulliver* describes the countries he has visited he also tries to protect them from any possible colonial ventures by the British: “As those countries which I have described do not appear to have any desire of being conquered, and enslaved, or murdered or driven out by colonies; nor abound either in gold, silver, sugar, or tobacco; I did humbly conceive they were by no means proper objects of our zeal, our valour, or our interest”⁷³. It is important that Swift condemns both colonialism and the greed and violence that accompany it. Paradoxically, at the end of Swift’s novel “*Gulliver* can be read as the ideal colonial subject”⁷⁴. He adores the metropolis of the rational horses and admits his inferiority: “In his complete dismissal of his wife and children – his repulsion towards them, even – *Gulliver* can be seen as having totally internalized the structures of (colonial) authority”⁷⁵.

One of the few studies dealing with the transformation of Swiftian irony by another writer is Marjorie Perloff’s article “Beckett in the Country of the Houyhnhnms”. After carefully analysing how and what elements of the hypotext were transformed into the Beckettian hypertext, Perloff concludes that “the caricaturing of others is largely a phantasmagoria within which the narrator’s own self is burlesqued and held up to ridicule”⁷⁶. In other words, Beckett’s caricatures the world like Swift but in doing so he also affects his own self that becomes a burlesque entity. Swift remains trapped in the cultural and philosophical structures of the Enlightenment, Beckett drives Swiftian irony toward the absurd.

A similar case of Swift’s intertextual use by a twentieth-century writer is Antony Johae who analyses the intertextual connection between Swift and Wole Soyinka. The latter used *Gulliver*’s travel to Lilliput in a poem he wrote while he was in prison. According to Johae, there is a correspondence between the

⁷⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 630.

⁷¹ *Ibidem*, p. 631.

⁷² *Ibidem*, p. 640.

⁷³ Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver’s Travels*, New York, Holt, Reinhart and Winston, 1964, p. 289.

⁷⁴ Katarzyna Bartoszynska, “Persuasive Ironies”, p. 636.

⁷⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 636.

⁷⁶ Marjorie Perloff, “Beckett in the Country of the Houyhnhnms: The Transformation of Swiftian Satire”, *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd’hui*, 2010, 22, p. 34.

allegorical modes of Swift's novel and those of Soyinka's poem *Gulliver*: "Rather than refusing Swift's idiom, Soyinka immediately appropriates it as a device to place a temporal and spatial distance between his speaker, Gulliver, and himself – a poet who, because he is also a prisoner, must use an alien archaic language in the manner of an eighteenth-century satirist to disguise an attack"⁷⁷ on (post-)colonial structures.

Not much Romanian scholarship has been dedicated to Eremia's and Oprea's Swiftian novels. Eremia has been the focus of Gabriela Chiciudean's study which analysed the novel *Gulliver în țara minciunilor* as an anti-utopian space⁷⁸. Badea-Gheracostea commented on Oprea's revisitation of Swift under the circumstances of post-communist Romania and the country's transition from totalitarianism to an "original" Romanian democracy. The critic notices that Oprea does not impress by his "mimetic capacity", Romania being allegorically represented by Capricia. According to Badea-Gheracostea, the Romanian novelist followed the speculative fiction recipe and built a fictional world whose signification means a lot to the twenty-first century reader⁷⁹. The same critical "track" is followed by Cornel Robu who also connects Oprea's novel to speculative fiction and insists on Oprea's use of irony as a very efficient *litotes*⁸⁰.

In my opinion the analysis of ironical use of the Swiftian travelogue by Eremia and Oprea cannot neglect the fact that Swift himself wanted to challenge two literary models when he wrote *Gulliver's Travels*. One such model is *Utopia* by Thomas Morus and the other one is Defoe's story of Alexander Selkirk, the shipwrecked sailor who became Robinson Crusoe. In both cases, a seaman tells the story of his travels. We can talk about a chain of ironical revisitations, but the irony is much clearer in the intertextual relation between Gulliver and Robinson Crusoe⁸¹.

⁷⁷ Antony Johae, "Wole Soyinka's 'Gulliver': Swift Transposed", *Comparative Literature*, 53, 2001, 1, p. 36.

⁷⁸ Gabriela Chiciudean, "L'Imaginaire de l'espace antiutopique chez Swift et Ion Eremia", *Caietele Echinox*, 2013, December, 25, pp. 277-292.

⁷⁹ Cătălin Badea-Gheracostea, "Sfada cu literatura. Mircea Oprea îl aduce pe Gulliver *La Bloc*" ["Quarrel with Literature. Mircea Oprea Brings Gulliver to *La Bloc*"], *Observator cultural*, 2012, 620, <https://www.observatorcultural.ro/articol/sfada-cu-literatura-mircea-oprea-il-aduce-pe-gulliver-la-bloc-2/> Accessed on December 21, 2021.

⁸⁰ Cornel Robu, "Sarcasm cu zâmbetul pe buze" ["Sarcasm with a Smiley Face"], *Tribuna*, 2012, 234, pp. 7-8.

⁸¹ Gulliver is an ironical replica to Robinson Crusoe, the Puritan slave trader who was shipwrecked and spent twenty-eight years on an island working and praying. Can one imagine a young man spending years on a deserted island and having no erotic dreams? Gulliver is shipwrecked several times but is much more aware that he and the humans are not only mind, but also body. The erotic is vaguely suggested in some relations Gulliver has with his female hosts, but Gulliver is quite different from the puritanical Crusoe.

Like *Gulliver's Travels*, Eremia's novel begins with a "Preface" signed A.I., pretended best friend of I.A., the author of the book. It is an ironical strategy that reminds the knowledgeable reader that Swift himself began his book with the paratextual correspondence between Captain Lemuel Gulliver and his publisher Richard Sympson. The more insistent and precise these paratexts are, the clearer is fiction's pretence of being a genuine, true experience. Both Eremia's and Oprea's main hero claim the same thing in the novel's paratext. Upon his return "amidst the British yahoos, he [Gulliver] decided to record his experiences again and for the last time"⁸². The pretence to truthfulness is ironically argued by both authors who make their Gulliver land on the warm sands of a beach, exactly like their illustrious model.

Eremia resumed the Swiftian narrative from where the great eighteenth-century writer had left it. After his return from the country of the reasonable horses, Lemuel Gulliver decides to embark on a new journey that will take him away from the disgusting British Yahoos. A shipwreck brings him to Kukunia, a country where an oligarchy mercilessly imposes the ideology of Granitism that nobody can challenge or doubt. The greatest crime in Kukunia is to think differently. The authorities are extremely vigilant and see enemies everywhere. The basic tenet of Granitism is devotion to and fear of the Leader simultaneously. In Kukunia, the enemy of all enemies is reality: "Reality is the great enemy: it dares to oppose to Great Granit!"⁸³. The lie imposed by force and cruelty, the supremacy of ideology over reality, these are the dominant characteristics of Kukunia.

An important episode where Eremia ironizes both his hypotext and his hypertext, more precisely the wonderful Kukunian realities, is Gulliver's visit to the Academy of Science. Swift's projectors are transformed by Eremia into Kukunian scientists preoccupied by equally strange projects. The food problem preoccupies both institutions. Swift's projectors want to extract food from excrements, the Kukunian scientists want to create a new species: "the stomachless man"⁸⁴. However, in some respects, Eremia's Academy of Science surpasses the Swiftian model, the irony turns into an enormous peal of laughter. Even scientific basic truths are twisted in order to satisfy Granit's personality cult. An extraordinary discovery of the Kukunian scientists is that "the axis of the terrestrial globe crosses Kukunia, it meets the earth exactly in the village where the Great Granit was born, and it stops seven thousand feet under the cellar of his

⁸² Ion Eremia, *Gulliver în țara minciunilor* [*Gulliver in the Country of Lies*], București, Fundația Academică Civică, 2015, p. 27: "în mijlocul yahoo-ilor britanici și-a pus încă o dată și pentru ultima data, mâna pe condei".

⁸³ *Ibidem*, p. 237: "Realitatea-i marele vinovat: îndrăznește să se împotrivescă Marelui Granit!".

⁸⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 141: "omul-fără-stomac".

parents' home"⁸⁵. Another important discovery, made by Granit himself, is that in Kukunia the ratio between the ray of the circle and its diameter is no longer 3.14 but only 3. All wheels must be built in such a way as to follow Granit's discovery, which creates great problems for transportation. Nobody dares to apply the traditional geometry and have vehicles with round wheels where the ratio between the ray of the wheel and its diameter is 3.14.

Like Swift's Gulliver in Lilliput, Eremia's Gulliver also becomes involved in the political life of the country. But if Swift's Gulliver is reluctant to take sides, Eremia's Gulliver tries to help the opposition. Neither does Eremia neglect to mock at the naïve or the hypocritical Western leftists who believed or pretended to believe the lies of Granitism, namely Communist propaganda. The end of Eremia's novel is a concoction based upon its Swiftian hypotext and some details depicting the end of the Romanian totalitarian regime forty years before it really happened in December 1989. Eremia foreshadowed history forty years before it happened. The end of the Kukunian totalitarian regime begins with a popular revolt (as in Romania, the end of Ceaușescu's regime). This revolt breaks up at one of the rallies summoned by the dictators themselves. The mob finally realize that they have been stupid, but they are numerous, they have force. The authoritarian regime is overruled. Gulliver returns to Britain coming to the conclusion that, in spite of their shortcomings, the British Yahoos are far better than the Kukunian Yahoos.

Upon his return to Britain, Gulliver is put into an asylum. The stress of the journey as well as his unbearable conclusions about human nature have taken their toll. Mental disorder affects both Gullivers, but Eremia's irony is much bitterer. In the asylum where he is interned, Gulliver meets Garry Bullit, a fierce defender of Granitism who converts Gulliver to his ideology. The inmates are looking forward to the future and the imminent victory of Granitism in Britain when Gulliver hopes to get out of his prison/asylum. How beautiful would England's Granitic future be! Eremia's humour is no less than Swift's. At the end of his journey, the Swiftian Gulliver converts to the hyper-rational ideology of the Houyhnhnms. Eremia also made his hero convert. The reader is warned not to believe that "the wonderful Kukunian state was run by a despot, half crazy, half charlatan, who apparently mocked at his poor people who suffered because of hunger and maddening fear"⁸⁶. The future belongs to Granitism! – announces Eremia ironical with himself, with his readers, and with his Gulliver.

Mircea Opriță's *Călătorie în Capricia*, a very daring satire of post-communist Romania, a more recent resurrection of Gulliver's myth in Romanian literature, operates like to sort of sequel to the overthrow of Granitism. In Opriță's allegorical

⁸⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 145: "axa globului terestru trece prin Kukunia, înțeapă pământul exact în satul unde s-a născut Marele Granit și se oprește la șapte mii de picioare sub beciul casei sale părintești".

⁸⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 31: "că minunatul stat kukunez ar fi fost condus de un despot pe jumătate nebun și jumătate șarlatan care, chipurile, și-ar fi bătut joc de bietul său popor hămesit de foame și înebunit de groază".

travelogue the tyrannical Granit is replaced by the tyrannical Ciocesko. Like Eremia, Opriță maintains some elements from the Swiftian hypotext and he makes them operate in an ironical mode.

Mary, Gulliver's wife, is only an episodic appearance in Swift's novel. Lemuel has married her because he needs her dowry. He does not spend too much time with her before he goes on another journey. But the epitome of ingratitude occurs when Gulliver returns from his fourth voyage and he finds, in his patient wife and even in his children, only Yahoo features. While Eremia shows no interest in this female figure, Opriță notices how age and time has changed Gulliver's wife as if youth and beauty were supposed to be a woman's eternal duty. Says Opriță's Gulliver: "I loved her a lot, but I was almost ashamed to get out into the world with her, and she did not seem to remember the years of her virginal youth, nor did I feel that they had ever existed"⁸⁷. In Opriță's novel, the alienation and the estrangement between the spouses lead to the ironical treatment of the main character's ideas about masculinity.

There are two scenes in Opriță's novel that remind the knowledgeable reader of Gulliver's famous discussion with the monarch from Brobdingnag. In one of them Gulliver encounters King Maidan, a successful businessman, great admirer of royalties and leader of a minority community easily recognizable by the Romanian reader. He had done good business "in cahoots with some M.P.'s and they had made good money together at a time when nobody had the stupid thought to pay his taxes to the island's treasury out of his winnings"⁸⁸. The mores of post-1990 Romania are analysed against the litmus of eighteenth-century England. Irony is the instrument. In the second conversation, Gulliver challenges the present-day leader of Romania, ironically called Trosnack. The naïve British will be severely punished.

Opriță does not confess to having read Eremia's novel, but he seems to have written a sequel to Eremia's dystopia. What happened after the overthrow of Granit's regime? "It seems to me [Gulliver] that having removed the barriers of the Bright Age⁸⁹ almost overnight, the island's inhabitants spoiled themselves with lots of democratic perversions..."⁹⁰. The mushrooming private universities are, for instance, one of the consequences of the rigorous censorship of academic life under the previous regime. Quantity and aggressive pecuniary interests have

⁸⁷ Mircea Opriță, *Călătorie*, p. 51: "o iubeam mult, dar aproape mă cuprindea rușinea să mă arăt cu ea în lume, iar de anii tinereții ei feciorelnice nu părea să-și amintească nici ea, după cum nici eu nu-i mai simțeam să fi existat".

⁸⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 152: "întovărășindu-se cu niște politicieni din Parlament, și câștigaseră mult împreună, într-o vreme când nimeni nu se gândea la prostia fără margini de a-și plăti din câștiguri dările către visteria insulei."

⁸⁹ Ironical denomination adequate both for Granit's and Ciocesko's regimes.

⁹⁰ Mircea Opriță, *Călătorie*, p. 162: "Ieșiți peste noapte dintre opreliștile Luminoasei Epoci, locuitorii insulei îmi pare că au trăit un adevărat răsfăț al desfrânarilor democratice..."

replaced the ideological control. What is better? – this is the question lurking behind the ironical discourse. Gulliver's visit to one of these universities is one of the most efficient ironical episodes in the novel: "The Lord Dean was a short and stocky man whose figure would have signalled a charlatan in England, but here in the City of the Sun pointed to the most distinguished academic guarantees"⁹¹. Gulliver could not talk with the Rector who was abroad. He wanted to sign an agreement with the main university from Gulbbdubdrib. Gulliver could only see his portrait: "The Lord Rector was full of authority and determined to stay by himself on the wall, undisturbed by any other follower interested in his position"⁹².

The second comparative level involving Swift, Eremia, and Oprea operates with Gulliver's experiences which have no counterpart in Swift's hypotext. Eremia's and Oprea's hypertexts include various ironical strategies: derision, mordancy, raillery. They all make possible the moral survival of the locals – be they from Kukunia or from Capricia - under specific socio-historical conditions (communism and post-communism) which, ironically and sadly, are less different than their ideologies preach.

The title of Eremia's novel *Gulliver în țara minciunilor* hides a pun in Romanian. The author played upon a phonetic phenomenon: the closeness of the Romanian word *minciună* (lie) and the word *minune* (wonder). The inhabitants of the country visited by Gulliver call it *Wonderland* (Țara Minunilor) with an ironical reference to Alice's upside-down world, whereas Gulliver calls it *The Country of Lies* (Țara Minciunilor).

The Swiftian Gulliver is supposed to be an enemy, a spy of Blefuscu. In Eremia's book, Gulliver is suspected of being an agent working for one of the numerous enemies of Kukunia, but most plausibly an agent of Goldania, Kukunia's fierce rival. In Eremia's book the reference to the Cold War paranoical obsession about the overwhelming presence of the enemy everywhere in society is much more powerful, detestable, and also ironically heart-breaking. The methods used by Granit's police during the inquest remind the reader of the real Romanian secret police. The prosecutors changed but the detainee, poor Gulliver, was submitted to torture for days and nights on end. Even the language reminds one of the Romanian literature of detention. Gulliver's cell is "his stone coffin"⁹³. Gulliver is condemned to forced labour in "the Slaves' Valley"⁹⁴, the Kukunian Gulag. The similarity between the Slaves' Valley and the Danube-Black-Sea Canal, one of the most important locations of the Romanian Gulag, is striking. The

⁹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 53: "Lordul Decan era un bărbat scund și îndesat, cu o figură care în Anglia ar fi părut de șarlatan, însă aici, în Cetățuia Soarelui, prezenta cele mai distinse garanții academice".

⁹² *Ibidem*, p. 54: "Lordul Rector era plin de autoritate și hotărât să stea cât mai mult pe perete, singur și nederanjat de nici un alt urmaș interesat de funcția lui".

⁹³ Ion Eremia, *Gulliver*, p. 61: "coșciugul meu de piatră".

⁹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 65: "Valea Robilor".

most terrible torture in the Slaves' Valley is hunger. But, ironically, Gulliver can eat his fill during the night. He looks at the sky and sees: "The Taurus was sizzling in an enormous frying pan, and the Ram was frizzling at a slow fire, while the Crab, red and tempting, bathed in clove sauce"⁹⁵. The theatricality of Kukunian life is another grievous irony which, unfortunately, the Romanians experienced before 1990 and the North Koreans still do. Fiction and reality blend again in dire irony. Eremia's Gulliver records how the Kukunian people bless their destiny because it has made them "contemporary with his glorious reign"⁹⁶, Granit's reign. People mimic they have three meals a day, although there is no food on the plates. Everything is an appalling and ironical make believe. Lolla, the head of Kukunian opposition explains to Gulliver: "Theatricalization and worshipping Granit are two aspects of the same problem, two effects of the same cause"⁹⁷. Granit, the ironical re-presentation of Stalin, is the ardent follower of "Kalamuk-the Lunatic"⁹⁸, an honest but utopian stringer recognizable as a fictionalized Lenin: "In fact, Granit himself does not deny this: he proclaims himself to be the follower and legitimate heir of this wise man"⁹⁹.

Among the institutions that Gulliver visits in Kukunia is the Writers' Palace, an episode which Eremia added to the delight of Romanian readers. The increasing ideologization of culture is a main point in Eremia's allegorical dystopia. Article 578 of the writers' regulations says that the only genres admitted by law are the ode and the psalm: "Under certain conditions, the epic is also allowed but only when it exalts the glorious deeds of the ruler or of a Granitist hero"¹⁰⁰. Books are ordered by the "generous leader of thought from our country"¹⁰¹. Every year, the writers' guild receives "a list of orders, according to all the rules of modern trade"¹⁰².

Eremia points to the perverse character of Granit's philosophy, a bitterly ironical reading of the discourse on freedom and human rights. The slave himself proclaims that he is a free man. Gulliver's Kukunian guide asks the British visitor to make an evaluation of his former experiences and recognize that this is the most deviant situation one could imagine: "Did it ever occur to any slave master from your land to ask the slave to admit by himself, shout at the top of his voice, and

⁹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 68: "Taurul se perpelea într-o uriașă frigare, iar Berbecul se rumenea la foc mocnit, în timp ce Racul se scălda, roșu și ispititor, în sos de cuișoare".

⁹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 71: "contemporanii strălucitei sale domnii".

⁹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 72: "Cultivarea teatrului și divinizarea lui Granit sunt două aspecte ale aceleiași cauze".

⁹⁸ *Ibidem*, p.106: "Kalamuk-Lunatecul".

⁹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 139: "De altfel, nici Granit nu susține altceva: el se proclamă adeptul și moștenitorul legitim al acestui înțelept".

¹⁰⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 215: "În anumite condiții, este îngăduită și epopeea, dar numai atunci când cântă fapte glorioase ale cărmuirii sau ale oricărui erou granitist".

¹⁰¹ *Ibidem*, p. 222: "generosul diriguitor al gândirii din țara noastră".

¹⁰² *Ibidem*, p. 222: "o listă de comenzi, după toate regulile comerțului modern".

boast that he, the slave, is a free man?”¹⁰³. Schizophrenia is a national mental disorder and its association with the workings of irony by Breuer is more than adequate in reading both Eremia’s Kukunia and Opriță’s Capricia. The inhabitants of Capricia, Opriță’s allegory of post-communist Romania, tell Gulliver about their way of life before the overthrow of Ciocesko. They thought and discussed privately in a certain way, but they had to discuss publicly differently:

Pushed by necessity, they slowly put together a new science which is called “skizophrenia”, in the idiom of that place, and which helps you divide your personality exactly into two parts, like a fish carefully split from head to tail, along its spine and which also has incredible effects for someone who is not acquainted with the secrets of this subject matter under Caprician patent. Consequently, at his workplace, a native can be a fierce admirer of the princely wisdom, but at home, with his wife, more rarely with his children, he is an equally fierce opponent of Ciocesko, after he has made sure that his windows are closed and the key has been turned in the lock¹⁰⁴.

The similarities with the Romanian realities under the communist regime create a fictional reality where reality itself seems to overpass fiction. Kukunian academics must rival not so much in scholarship as in their faith to Granit and the loser often ends up in prison, or even worse¹⁰⁵. Kukunia has a lot of wood but all of it is exported abroad for good money which is used by the ruling class¹⁰⁶.

Finally, the people of Kukunia put an end to the Granitist regime by a massive revolt. The similarity with the 1989 revolt of the Romanian people is stunning and moving. The foreshadowing capacity of literary creativity is amazing and an implicit irony to all the supposed specialists in political science who could not foresee the end of the Communist regimes at the end of 1989. Almost half a century before the real fall of the Romanian communist system, Eremia crystal-balled the enthusiasm of the people who realized that they could be free, that they could overthrow this political horror – Granit’s regime:

At the beginning, people seemed to have woken up from a terrible nightmare and could not believe that reality is different from what they had seen in their dreams. [...]

¹⁰³ *Ibidem*, p. 201: “I s-a năzărit vreunui stăpân de robi de la voi să-i ceară robului să recunoască singur, să strige în gura mare și să se bată cu pumnul în piept că el, robul, este un om liber?”.

¹⁰⁴ Mircea Opriță, *Călătorie*, p. 105: “Împinși de nevoie, ei au pus încetul cu încetul bazele unei științe noi, care în limba locului se cheamă ‘skizofrenie’ și te ajută să-ți împarți personalitatea exact în două, ca pe un pește despicat cu grijă de la cap la coadă, de-a lungul șirei spinării, dar cu efecte de necrezut pentru cine nu cunoaște secretele acestei discipline cu patent caprician. Astfel, un localnic poate fi un îndârjit lăudător al înțelepciunii princiare la locul său de muncă, iar acasă, de față cu nevasta, mai rar și cu copiii, un la fel de dârz înjurător al lui Ciocesko, după ce s-a asigurat că geamurile îi sunt bine închise și cheia răsucită în broască”.

¹⁰⁵ The purges of the Romanian universities in the 1950’s are the model of these Kukunian evolutions.

¹⁰⁶ The priority of export to fulfilling the local people’s needs was a main characteristic of Romanian economy during the Communist regime.

This put them in a real mood of exaltation. The happiness that entered their soul all of a sudden, the impetuous joy that flooded their heart and their eyes were so overwhelming that people seemed to be drunk. They walked randomly on the streets, laughed, sang, hugged one another, even if they had never met, they did all sorts of childish pranks and tricks¹⁰⁷.

The trial of the Kukunian leaders forecasts the real trial of Communist Romania's top leadership in 1989, but the literary version is more brutal and lacks the compromises of reality¹⁰⁸. In Eremia's fiction these top leaders have, at least, the "dignity" of keeping their dark faces to the end. The trial takes place in the main square of Kukunia's capital. The leaders start fighting with one another and in the end, they all die at their own hands, in a general skirmish. In Romania's historical reality the former Communist leaders did not even have the dignity to admit their evil deeds. Reality becomes the irony of fiction.

Gulliver's ironical end in Eremia's novel presages today's nostalgics in Romania. Interned in an asylum, Gulliver comes to the conclusion that the peoples are unable to rule themselves. They need great leaders, such as Granit, or Nero, or Caligula. The Kukunian people "could not or would not understand such a great genius as him [Granit], who wanted to change humanity and the whole Universe"¹⁰⁹. Fiction is no longer the ironical representation of reality, reality is the ironical representation of fiction.

Oprîță's exercise of ironical intertextuality, namely his depiction of Capricia, contains elements in which Romanian readers can easily recognize post-1990 everyday realities. Streets are decorated "cheaply and from their inspirational point of view, in very diverse ways, with scraps of paper and garbage"¹¹⁰. Gulliver admires the Romanian malls: "endless shops holding so many garments that the whole Kent could be clothed in the silk and the velvet one could find over there, and even Ireland, after getting rid of its surplus of snivelling and starving children as the honourable Master Swift fancied"¹¹¹. The reference to Swift's famous

¹⁰⁷ Ion Eremia, *Gulliver*, pp. 329-330: "La început, oamenii păreau că s-au trezit dintr-un groaznic coșmar și nu le venea să creadă că realitatea e alta decât cea văzută în vis. [...] Asta le-a provocat o adevărată stare de exaltare. Fericirea care le-a pătruns dintr-o dată în suflet, bucuria năvalnică ce le-a inundat inima și ochii erau atât de copleșitoare, încât oamenii păreau cuprinși de o stare de beție, care îi făcea să umble pe străzi în neștire, să râdă, să cânte, să se îmbrățișeze unii cu alții, chiar dacă nu se cunoșteau între ei, să facă tot felul de năstrușnicii și năzbâtii copilărești."

¹⁰⁸ The most prominent leaders of Communist Romania were initially (in 1990) given long prison sentences. Five years later they were all free for medical reasons. None of the members of the Executive Committee of the Romanian Communist Party died in prison.

¹⁰⁹ Ion Eremia, *Gulliver*, p. 340: "nu putea și nu voia să înțeleagă un geniu nemaipomenit ca el, ce voia să schimbe fața omenirii și a Universului întreg".

¹¹⁰ Mircea Oprîță, *Călătorie*, p. 63: "ieftin și extrem de variat ca inspirație, cu hârtii și gunoaie".

¹¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 65: "niște prăvălii fără capăt cu hăinărie cât să îmbraci tot Kentul în mătăsurile și în catifelele de acolo, ba chiar și Irlanda, după ce te scapi de surplusul ei de copii mucoși și leșinați de foame în felul închipuit de onorabilul Master Swift".

pamphlet *A Modest Proposal* creates a multi-layered text where the encounter of literary and historical references leads to humour. Nor are the numerous academies of Capricia forgotten. The Swiftian Academy of Projectors gets multiplied in Oprea's Capricia because of the potential academicians' limitless pride. By *reductio ad absurdum*, the academic imposture and fragility are emphasised even more efficiently: "Some [Academies] only have five-six founding members"¹¹² and would not admit any more

lest they should be obliged, later, to exclude them for plotting to occupy the stool of the incumbent president. I also heard that there are Academies with only one member who has put on the wall, like the Lord Rector I have previously mentioned, his own portrait, but not the empty frames of his successors; either because the president of such an institution is to die only at the same time as the academic business founded by him, or because he truly thinks he is immortal¹¹³.

Gulliver is informed about the previous political regime led by a local Granit, called Ciocesko, whose fastuous visits abroad either to the powerful Tramontania¹¹⁴ or to the small and remote Cumingie are meant to stimulate his personality cult. On the other hand, at exactly the same time the people of Capricia are starving. Swiftian irony is deftly used. Oprea's Gulliver presents soberly and mockingly realities of the communist regime's last years. Lady Frusina, Ciocesko's wife, is a female scientist of "inter-island renown"¹¹⁵. A Romanian reader immediately remembers Elena Ceaușescu's ambitions to be considered a famous scientist. Food and electric power lack "because the prince had decided to sell Volta's current to other islands"¹¹⁶, the Capricians' enthusiasm for their leaders is, apparently, overwhelming. They want to be led by Lady Frusina and her husband "on the luminous way opened by their wise thought towards an even brighter future at which one cannot look without eclipse goggles"¹¹⁷. In Capricia, the post-revolutionary political changes brought freedom of speech – an idea that does not appear so vigorously in the Swiftian hypotext – and an invigorated and hyper-agitated political life. Gulliver is to be the voice of common sense and Swiftian irony is at its best:

¹¹² *Ibidem*, p. 70: "Unele se mulțumesc cu cinci-șase academicieni fondatori...".

¹¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 70: "ca să nu fie nevoite să-i excludă mai târziu, pentru uneltiri la fotoliul președintelui aflat în funcție. Am auzit că există și Academii cu un singur academician, care și-a pus pe perete, asemeni Lordului Rector despre care am vorbit nu demult, portretul propriu, nu însă și ramele goale ale succesorilor, fie din pricină că președintele unei astfel de instituții se pregătește să moară doar odată cu firma academică înființată de el, fie că se crede cu adevărat nemuritor".

¹¹⁴ Allegorical USA.

¹¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 113: "renume inter-insular".

¹¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 112: "fiindcă principele hotărâse să vândă în alte insule curentul lui Volta".

¹¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 115: "pe calea luminoasă deschisă de gândirea lor înțeleaptă spre un viitor încă și mai luminos, la care să nici nu te poți uita fără ochelari de eclipsă".

I do not want to give the British example as the best in the whole world because it is still unclear to me where the Tories break the egg and what egg end is to be broken by the Whigs. But in any case, I do not find the rash of parties that have erupted, like measles, on Carpacia's skin to be very useful for the island¹¹⁸.

Oprîță insists on transporting peculiar elements of Romanian post-1990 politics into his fiction of Swiftian inspiration. Irony is multiple. Swift becomes a target and a tool of irony. Remarkable, in this respect, is the reference to one of the ethnic parties that makes Romanian politics ever since 1990. It is as if "overnight the honourable Celtic townsmen from Cardiff founded a party called Wide Ireland and they saw this expanse up to Scotland and even continental Normandy, namely all over the lands where their ancestors once roamed"¹¹⁹. After refusing to submit to Trosnack, the amoral leader to Capricia, Gulliver falls into disgrace.

The author and his Romanian readers catch a last view of Gulliver abandoned on the last ship of the Romanian fleet, all the other ships having been surreptitiously sold by Trosnack for his own benefit. The ship turns in a whirl and the north can be everywhere. It would have been very difficult to find a more adequate metaphor for the post-communist Romanian society deprived of any inspiring ideal except gross consumerism.

In conclusion, the analysis of (Swiftian) irony in its making and refashioning by Ion Eremia and Mircea Oprîță offers a great example of intertextuality. On the one hand, their ironical use of an illustrious literary model shows the vigorous versatility of the hypotext. On the other hand, Eremia and Oprîță include the Romanian novel into a world network of influences where impact and significance enrich both the hypotext and the hypertext.

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¹¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 119: "Nu vreau să dau exemplul britanic drept cel mai bun ce poate exista în întreaga lume, mai ales că încă nu m-am putut lămuri unde sparg oul cei din partidul tory și ce capăt le mai rămâne de spart celor din partidul Whig. Dar în orice caz, nici puzderia de partide erupte ca un pojar pe pielea Capriciei n-am găsit că ar fi de mare folos pentru insulă".

¹¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 124: "onorabilii târgoveți celți din Cardiff și-au încropit peste noapte un partid cu numele de Irlanda Lățită, văzând lățirea asta până în Scoția și chiar în Normandia continentală, adică peste tot unde au băntuit cândva strămoșii lor".

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SWIFTIAN IRONY AND THE ROMANIAN NOVEL (Abstract)

This paper offers a comparative analysis of two Romanian novels – *Gulliver în țara minciunilor* [*Gulliver in the Country of Lies*] by Ion Eremia and *Călătorie în Capricia* [*A Journey to Capricia*] by Mircea Opriță – which constitute excellent samples of the subversive use of Swiftian irony during the Communist and the post-Communist period. The first comparative level focuses on the ironical use of the Gulliver's travels (as a trope) by the Romanian novelists. The second comparative level points to the practices of derision in Eremia's and Opriță's hypertexts. Swift, like all great writers, belongs not only to his age. His irony is topical even in historical and political contexts very different from the Enlightenment.

Keywords: hypertext, hypotext, communism, post-communism, subversion.

IRONIA SWIFTIANĂ ȘI ROMANUL ROMÂNESC (Rezumat)

Această lucrare oferă o analiză comparativă a două romane românești – *Gulliver în țara minciunilor* de Ion Eremia și *Călătorie în Capricia* de Mircea Opriță – care constituie modele excelente de folosire subversivă a ironiei swiftiene în perioada comunistă și post-comunistă. Primul nivel comparativ e focalizat pe utilizarea ironică a călătoriilor lui Gulliver (ca trop) de către romancierii români. Al doilea nivel comparativ indică practicile deriziunii în hipotextele lui Eremia și Opriță. Ca toți marii scriitori, Swift nu aparține doar unei epoci. Ironia lui este de actualitate chiar și în contexte istorice și politice foarte diferite de iluminism.

Cuvinte-cheie: hypertext, hipotext, comunism, postcomunism, subversiune.

CHRISTINNE SCHMIDT

**FACETS OF IRONY IN COMMUNIST TESTIMONIAL
LITERATURE. CASE STUDY: ANNIE BENTOIU,
TIMPUL CE NI S-A DAT [*THE TIME WE WERE GIVEN*]**

Inner freedom is also accessible to those condemned to death,
and therefore to all of us. All we have to do is not make it
dependent on outer freedom, over which we have less power¹.
Annie Bentoiu, *Timpul ce ni s-a dat* [*The Time We Were Given*]

Memory and Irony: A Dialogue

Several years elapsed between the Revolution of 1989 and the writing and publication of Annie Bentoiu's memoirs (suggestively entitled *The Time We Were Given*). The first two-volume edition was published in 2000 and 2006. Far from being insignificant, this temporal distance is a reminder of at least two aspects that are specific to all the volumes of memoirs available to the reader – in a considerable amount – since the last decade of the last century. On the one hand, it is a reminder of the impossibility of publishing such a discourse during the years of the totalitarian regime (with the exception of those published in exile, which had a different fate), and thus becomes a testimony to the silence imposed on those who did not accept to renounce their own values during their most difficult times². On the other hand, temporal distance allows a necessary and sometimes even a healing detachment, so that the process of remembering can take place under the imperative of naming a truth (of personal and collective life) retrieved from the overlapping layers of a sinuous, difficult, never fully known history. This is an intellectual effort, and memoirists mention the labor it involves³. Often

¹ Annie Bentoiu, *Timpul ce ni s-a dat. Memorii: 1944–1959* [*The Time We Were Given: Memoirs 1944–1959*], București, Humanitas, 2019, p. 468: “Libertatea interioară este accesibilă și condamnaților la moarte, deci nouă tuturor. Totul e să n-o facem să depindă de cea exterioară, asupra căreia avem mai puțină putere”. Unless otherwise stated, the quotations are translated into English by the author of this paper.

² The reason for the abundance of subjective literature after the Revolution is succinctly expressed in the following excerpt: “We have all lived in timid silence, each knowing well only his/her own history, and that for many decades” – *Ibidem*, p. 538: “Am viețuit cu toții într-o tăcere timorată, fiecare cunoscându-și bine numai propria istorie și asta timp de mai multe decenii”.

³ I think here not only about Annie Bentoiu, but also about other great names who will take on this labour that sometimes becomes too hard (as is the case, for example, for Adriana Georgescu or Oana Orlea, who experienced detention and who remember this period with great difficulty). From a

highlighting common time intervals, the memoirs that aim to revisit the years of the Romanian communist regime are, however, very different. This is perhaps the best argument in favor of memoirs as ego-documents: although they may recount a common collective history of the same epoch or society, memoirs inevitably bear the imprint of subjectivity. Collective history – which ultimately allows an objective verification of the events narrated – is reordered through the prism of a subjective history, of a voice that assumes the authorship of the discourse⁴. Annie Bentoiu herself gave up the study of history towards the end of the 1940s because she was forbidden to revisit the past in a way that would make it be more vivid and therefore more authentic than a “dry string of dates, battles or peace treaties”⁵. It was not until several decades later that she had the opportunity to put this principle into practice by writing her memoirs about the first years of the communist regime in Romania.

Annie Bentoiu’s memoirs transcend subjective history into collective history, highlighting the intertwining of these two inseparable existential levels. The man conditioned by the history of his time, the man trapped in the chains of a totalitarian regime, be they invisible or otherwise, lives his existence in a context that can become merciless. This is the case of some of the great Romanian intellectuals, who during the communist regime took up the struggle for resistance through culture or faith. Among their testimonies, Annie Bentoiu’s writing is defined by a discursive complexity that is due to her erudition and inner richness, two elements that frame a personal vision of life and a series of moral values firmly exposed and defended. These memoirs tell the story of a world and an era by their key events, revisited through a double filter: the personal and the collective reality, always interacting and impacting each other⁶. The discourse is not only about oneself (and this is the essential point which, according to Georges Gusdorf, distinguishes memoirs from autobiography⁷), as it involves much more: a retrospective narrative which concerns both the events of personal life and of society, covering a clearly defined period of time and depicting a specific

philosophical point of view, this intellectual effort imposed by the exercise of remembering is discussed by Henri Bergson, quoted by Paul Ricoeur in the volume *Memoria, istoria, uitarea* [*Memory, History, Forgetting*]. Translated from French by Ilie Gyurcsik and Margareta Gyurcsik, Timișoara, Amarcord, 2001, pp. 45-46.

⁴ Georges Gusdorf, *Les écritures du moi. Lignes de vie I*, Paris, Odile Jacob, 1991, Digital edition, Chicoutimi, Québec, 2018, p. 328,

http://classiques.uqac.ca/contemporains/gusdorf_georges/ecritures_du_moi_lignes_de_vie_t1/ecritures_du_moi_lignes_de_vie_t1.pdf. Accessed October 30, 2021. Although written from a personal perspective, memoirs concern history, and are, paradoxically, ego-documents whose main focus is not on the ego.

⁵ Annie Bentoiu, *Timpul ce ni s-a dat*, p. 188: “o seacă înșiruire de date, de bătălii sau tratate de pace”.

⁶ I discussed the amazing complexity of this memoir discourse in an article entitled “Memory and History – Reading a Woman’s Past: Annie Bentoiu”, following my presentation with the same title at CONCEF – National Conference of Young Researchers in Philology, Sibiu, 22-24 October 2020.

⁷ Georges Gusdorf, *Les écritures du moi*, pp. 327-328.

historical context, but also including brief sociological studies, historical fragments, political explanations, juridical analyses, psychological insights, literary and artistic examples, etc.⁸ The aim is to understand a phenomenon that shaped an entire generation – and that still impacts today's Romanian society. Inside these pages we read a history divided into multiple levels rendered in an elevated style. This history reveals both the example of one's own way of settling in a false and rigid communist world, and – in a deeper reading – the finest characteristics of a mature writing style. The memoir practice is meant to restore a time 'that we were given', a time that at first glance seems to be lost, given the impossibility of employing the talents, the education, the work of a capable, admirable young woman. As the discourse advances, it becomes clear, however, that this absence is compensated by her human fulfillment and extraordinary inner growth. Thus, the memoirs are defined by their complexity, read in multiple keys: thematically, these concern human dignity, inner beauty and a way of life; stylistically, they regard the way the narrative is articulated and organized.

The very center of these memoirs is a fresco of the public life in the first years of communist Romania, along with a sketch of the private lives of the author and of those close to her, recalled in their major events. The historical account is marked by precision and gravity, the analyses provide density to the discourse, and the overall picture of the period evoked is complex and sober. Nevertheless, Annie Bentoiu's memories are a colorful retrospective, scrutinizing and bringing together the atrocities of the time – in the major historical events – and the domestic everyday life, which, while carrying its own burdens, is deeply rooted in practices that allow inner survival. These practices include reading, enjoying nature, friendships and family, sharing spiritual and cultural experiences. At times, the use of irony itself can become such a practice, a way of reclaiming intimate freedoms and, more deeply, a form of resistance through words. Consequently, there is an ethical dimension of irony as a type of approach to the historical events of the establishment of the totalitarian regime in Romania in the 1950s⁹. Moreover, irony can also have a political dimension, since it obeys the principle of confronting "a reality that is both unethical and immoral"¹⁰, which defines the totalitarian experience and requires from both the individual and the community a status of opposition and resistance. This aim is visible in those fragments that describe people's attitudes towards historical reality, where irony can even acquire a moral

⁸ The unfolding of this discourse as a palimpsest which overlaps several narrative layers has been discussed more extensively in the article referenced above, see footnote 6.

⁹ Corina Croitoru explains in *Politica ironiei în poezia românească sub comunism* [*The Politics of Irony in Romanian Poetry under the Communist Regime*] (Cluj-Napoca, Casa Cărții de Știință, 2014, p. 40) that in Eastern European societies, after the Second World War, irony preserves an ethical meaning and becomes an indirect response to the urgencies of history.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 39.

value¹¹, insofar as it implies a reaction to the society of the time and to its contradictions. These characteristics define a “subversive and oppositional”¹² type of irony, in which the attempt to undermine the dominant ideology indicates “evidence of a democratic aspiration to an alternative”¹³. Officially impossible, the alternative has to be formulated clandestinely, advocating the human need to preserve a person’s values and individual dignity. In other words, the ironic response to the reality of the time allows man, even within a totalitarian regime, the kind of freedom which no one can take away from him, the freedom of thought and the freedom of spirit (even if not the freedom of expression¹⁴). Finally, it is an inner freedom very close to cultural (intellectual) freedom and spiritual (religious) freedom to which the writings of those who lived the prison experience testify in particular¹⁵. Thus, at a deep level, the hermeneutical exercise can reveal how irony “in totalitarian societies presents sustained tendencies, however fragile, to recover lost freedoms”¹⁶. I will try to prove, through the following analysis, that, in addition, by assuming this restorative function, irony can also denote the revendication of lost human dignity.

But while it is typical for fiction in totalitarian societies to attack the political system through ironic, subversive allusions allowed by the very oblique nature of writing¹⁷, in the case of memoirs, which aspire to be as faithful as possible to objective historical events, such openings are only possible in the context of a political turnaround (which is what happened in Romania after 1989). In such a context, to record – even ironically – the reality of oppression means to turn a

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 37.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 44.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 44.

¹⁴ What Annie Bentoïu, like many other Romanian intellectuals, succeeds in doing only in the 1990s, through writing, is to overcome “the obligation to speak in only one way” – Annie Bentoïu, *Timpul ce ni s-a dat*, p. 676: “obligația de a vorbi într-un singur fel”. Moreover, the author explains: “In fact, the story I am trying to tell here could never have been written if it had not been for the dramatic collapse of states in 1989, so often compared to dominoes. In the fifties we didn’t know the details, but all this, suspected or presumed, formed above our heads a compact and dark sky under which we had to survive as best we could.” – *Ibidem*, p. 538: “De fapt, povestirea pe care o încerc aici nici n-ar fi putut fi scrisă vreodată, dacă nu se întâmpla în 1989 acea dramatică prăbușire de state, comparate de atâtea ori cu niște piese de domino. În anii cincizeci nu știam amănunte, dar toate acestea, bănuite sau presimțite, alcătuiau deasupra capetelor noastre un cer compact și întunecat, sub care trebuia să supraviețuim cum om putea”.

¹⁵ Some of the best known writings about the experience of detention, in which cultural and spiritual freedom play a crucial role, are those by Lena Constante and Harry Brauner, Galina Răduleanu, Nicole Valéry-Grossu or Sabina and Richard Wurmbrand. Annie Bentoïu points out the “weight” of these testimonies compared to those of the “free” people: “The testimonies that came to us from prisons have a completely different tragic force” – *Ibidem*, p. 507: “Mărturiile care ne-au venit din închisori au cu totul altă forță tragică”.

¹⁶ Corina Croitoru, *Politica ironiei*, p. 45.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 41.

lucid eye on *a different, past time* and to provide an answer to the question of how that era unfolded, in all its aspects¹⁸. These practices engage a second purpose of irony, which can be identified by analyzing the specificity of post-communist writing, more precisely those examples that highlight the ironic or critical lines of the author towards the revisited past. Without necessarily having a subversive stake, as they were written after the falling of the political regime, they can still demonstrate the author's detachment from this past, a detachment necessary for healing and for the fulfillment of one's own destiny.

The examples discussed in this study are classified according to the different forms of irony identified in the text, and they target the two distinct levels mentioned above: on the one hand, irony as an attitude of individuals or communities towards the communist regime (with ethical, moral and political stakes) and, on the other hand, irony as a literary practice of post-communist memoir writing (with critical and restorative stakes). I select from these memoirs only fragments in which irony (or its close forms: humor, comedy, self-irony) is readable explicitly or implicitly. Such a selection is based on the concept of *semiotic cut* (*coupe sémiotique*) proposed by Leo Spitzer in his studies of stylistics, a method which requires the choice of a single theme, closely examined and analyzed, and then correlated, when interpreting, with the narrative discourse as a whole¹⁹. This kind of approach allows a reflection on the forms and functions of irony in the memoir discourse. Following Spitzer's stylistic reading exercises, a second important notion for this study is that of *stylistic deviation* (*écart stylistique*), which implies the possibility of identifying variations or meaningful deviations at different levels of a text (at the level of the language, therefore, in relation to the linguistic norm; at the level of the form, thus in relation to the stylistic norm; or at the level of the overall organization of the text). For the literary researcher what is important is both *how* the deviation occurs and – above all – *why* the deviation occurs²⁰. I will therefore try, in the following, to highlight some ironic fragments identified in Annie Bentoïu's memoirs, starting from the premise that they represent a deviation from the norm governing the overall organization of the text, given that, as I have already shown, this text is marked

¹⁸ Annie Bentoïu, *Timpul ce ni s-a dat*, p. 553. The "obsessive need to understand" (*Ibidem*, p. 632: "nevoia obsesivă de a înțelege") is a painful process, but, precisely because of this, it is also purifying.

¹⁹ Leo Spitzer, *Études de style*, précédé par "Leo Spitzer et la lecture stylistique" de Jean Starobinski. Translated from English and German by Éliane Kaufholz, Alain Coulon and Michel Foucault, Paris, Gallimard, 1970, p. 28. The essential steps for this semiotic cut are also explained here: François Conne, "Coupes sémiotiques", in Jean-Pierre Sautot (ed.), *Le film de classe. Étude sémiotique et enjeux didactiques*, Limoges, Lambert – Lucas, 2008, pp. 105-142.

²⁰ Leo Spitzer, *Études de style*, pp. 18-19. Also Pierre Schoentjes identifies deviations (verbal deviations or, in writing, stylistic deviations), among the textual indicators of irony (along with tone, punctuation, repetition, juxtaposition, etc.), see *Poétique de l'ironie*, Paris, Seuil, 2001, p. 174.

rather by gravity, density and complexity, inviting the reader to reflection, comments and questions. Moreover, it is an erudite text where the author's intellectual upbringing plays a central role (Annie Bentoïu took courses in literature, history and law as a young student). The stakes of her discourse are not ironic, since irony can be identified at the local level but not at the level of the overall meaning of the text. In the density of this discourse, counterbalancing its gravity – or, on the contrary, reinforcing it – irony appears as a deviation, as *something else*, and precisely for this reason it becomes a meaningful aspect.

Facets of Irony in the Testimonial Discourse

As a first example, the very title of the volume, in its intertextuality, can be read in an ironic key. Such a reading reveals a very subtle literary practice: the reference to Mihai Eminescu's poem opens up a horizon of expectation and anticipates a personal and collective evolution. The "instant that we were given"²¹ in Eminescu's poem recalls the literary motif of *fugit irreparabile tempus* and is equated, in the text of these memoirs, with a "time" unfolding on two levels, thus charged with a double connotation. There is a time of personal history, which reveals a subjective charge as formative time, a time of maturation and of fundamental inner experiences, despite a context of marginalization and suffering. This is the time which, at the end of the narrative, can be invested with a positive value, since it has allowed the author's human, spiritual and intellectual development. But there is also a historical time, the time of the collectivities, the time of the repression, which is not a time to be regretted; in this case, it is "not a pity" that it should be consumed, that it should be "shed", that it should undergo profound transformations²². At this level, the contradiction between the time of inner history (in the poem quoted above, and in the writer's personal evolution) and the time of outer history imposed by constraining events opens up the possibility of a subtle interpretation using an ironic key, in the sense of an opposition between appearance and essence. Remembering "the time we were given" means revisiting the past in all its facets, reconstructing the whole of an "eternally mutilated"²³ mosaic; it means putting together, with lucidity, sometimes

²¹ The title of the memoirs invokes a verse of the poem *Stelele-n cer* [*Stars in the Sky*], slightly modified. A linguistic study might reveal the rich connotations of this modification itself. "The fleeting instant/ that we were given" (M. Eminescu, *Opere alese II*. [*Selected Works II*]. Edited and preface by Perpessicius, București, Minerva, 1973, p. 407: „clipa cea repede/ ce ni s-a dat”) becomes "the time we were given", thus suggesting a much longer interval.

²² See the last stanza of the poem mentioned above, "Is it not a pity/ To shed/ The fleeting instant/ That we were given?" (*Ibidem*, pp. 406-407: "Nu e păcat/ Ca să se lepede/ Clipa cea repede/ Ce ni s-a dat?").

²³ Annie Bentoïu, *Timpul ce ni s-a dat.*, p. 350: "veșnic mutilat".

with humor, but especially with a certain freedom, history and intimacy, saved and recovered through memory.

But this memory also reflects on the few responses allowed to Romanians when faced with the major political games that shaped the country's history in the second half of the 20th century. Among these possible responses is also the "sad and humorous' wisdom"²⁴, that is the attempt to verbalize, ironically and clandestinely, their resistance as a (temporary) way of overturning the hierarchy²⁵ and standing up for their own principles and values. In the "simple, sober and austere"²⁶ everyday existence, the recourse to irony takes on specific meanings and receives various forms of expression, suggesting different degrees of individual or community involvement in the struggle against the oppressive regime.

Both rhetorical (or verbal) irony, as an antiphrastic figure which involves saying something but conveying – intentionally – the exact opposite, and irony as a worldview involving various levels of meaning (cosmic irony, tragic irony, irony of fate)²⁷, are discursive forms that can be found in Annie Bentoïu's memoirs. In addition, some fragments touch the very fine lines of difference between irony, comedy and humor, the latter categories being included in the reference zone of irony by some authors²⁸. The first samples that I choose fall into these categories of comedy and humor, and belong to a collective oral memory. They are attributed to different personalities of the society of the time, and they recount jokes, anecdotes, or famous lines²⁹ that made the "tour of Bucharest"³⁰. This category includes, for example, phrases such as the one uttered by an actor on whom party obligations were imposed: "Well, I joined you as a louse, not as a fool!"³¹ or the bold and humorous reply that Mihail Jora utters when called on the telephone: "– Hello, *tovarășul* [*comrade*] Jora? – Jora yes, *tovarăș* [*comrade*] no!"³². More serious and demanding of the reader's reflection are the narratives in which serious realities of the time are veiled in humor (which saves them, to some extent only,

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 675: "înțelepciunea 'tristă și plină de umor'".

²⁵ Corina Croitoru, *Politica ironiei*, p. 42.

²⁶ Annie Bentoïu, *Timpul ce ni s-a dat*, p. 666: "simplă, sobră și cazonă". The more national decisions affect personal histories, the more people grow serious, reserved and rigid, the more irony becomes a form of resistance – *Ibidem*, p. 556.

²⁷ Claire Colebrook, *Irony*, New York, Routledge, 2005, p. 13, 17.

²⁸ Linda Hutcheon proposes such an association (in *Irony's Edge. The Theory and Politics of Irony*, New York, Routledge, 2005, p. 46), while Pierre Schoentjes considers humor and comedy to be situated "at the edge of irony" – *Poétique de l'ironie*, chapter "Aux frontières de l'ironie", pp. 212 and following.

²⁹ For Pierre Schoentjes, a significant difference consists in the fact that irony hurts, while humor is harmless (*Poétique de l'ironie*, p. 137).

³⁰ Annie Bentoïu, *Timpul ce ni s-a dat*, p. 456: "ocolul Bucureștilor".

³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 82: "Mă, eu m-am înscris la voi de lichea, nu de tâmpit!".

³² *Ibidem*, p. 456. "Tovarăș" is a specific direct address formula in the communist system, which can also suggest one's adherence to it. For this reason, Mihail Jora refuses, with humour, but very clear and firmly, this title: "– Alo! tovarășul Jora? – Jora da, tovarăș ba!".

from their tragedy). Pascal Benteoiu tells one such story, at the heart of which is a fictional trial in which workers brought in solely for the purpose of denouncing the accused take the floor as false witnesses, blaming Mihail Andricu, vice-president of the Union of Composers: “Pascal remembers one who began to denigrate the man in question and, forgetting what his name was, took a little piece of paper out of his pocket and spelt out ‘Tovarășul Andruică’, which created a moment of relaxation [...]”³³, but also pointed out the harsh reality of these false seats of judgment, which have shattered so many lives, unjustly condemning them.

The difference between the examples above, which illustrate situations of comedy and humor, and those that follow, which fall into the category of irony, lies in what Linda Hutcheon calls the critical edge of irony³⁴, the result of the fact that irony always weighs axiologically the situations to which it applies. Examples of this type differ in form, but they all share an evaluative side. First of all, I would like to point out the comments that Annie Benteoiu makes on fragments of official discourse (news, laws and decrees, etc.), which reveal an ironic writing practice through the reinterpretation of some of the most important official texts, absurd in their essence. Such is the case, for example, with the legal article which states, with regard to the expropriation of wealthy peasants, that if public officials and persons responsible for executing the decree refuse to carry out this task, they shall be punished by correctional imprisonment and a fine. The text, faithfully reproduced, is followed by this personal comment: “A civil war in which those who refuse to attack are punished by imprisonment! The situation was no doubt quite original”³⁵. In fact, a second reading of these legislative fragments allows Annie Benteoiu to understand some of the reasons of those who accepted to take part “in such humiliations of fellow human beings and in such senseless predation”³⁶. In a brief fragment concerning the political changeover of 23 August 1944, Annie Benteoiu comments on the bombastic style of the official discourse, the irony here more obvious and at the same time sharper: “[...] With determination and patriotic eagerness, the Romanian soldiers turned their weapons against the real enemy – the German-fascist imperialism – and joined the Soviet Army.’ Simple and beautiful! How didn’t we realize that this was the case?”³⁷. The meaning the sentences convey is explicitly the opposite of what they express (the

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 775: “Pascal își amintește de unul care a început să-l denigreze pe cel în cauză și, uitând care-i era numele, a scos din buzunar o hârtiuță și a silabisit ‘tovarășul Andruică’, ceea ce a creat un moment de destindere [...]”.

³⁴ Linda Hutcheon, *Irony’s edge*, p. 35.

³⁵ Annie Benteoiu, *Timpul ce ni s-a dat*, p. 414: “Un război civil în care cei care refuză să atace sunt pedepsiți cu închisoarea! Situația era fără îndoială destul de originală”.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 414: “la asemenea umiliri ale unor semenii și la acele prădăciuni fără sens”.

³⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 433: “[...] Cu hotărâre și avânt patriotic, ostașii români au întors armele împotriva adevăratului dușman – imperialismul germano-fascist – și s-au alăturat Armatei Sovietice’. Simplu și frumos! Cum de nu ne-a trecut prin minte că așa a fost?”.

way the Soviet army occupied Romania and the brutal behavior of the Russian soldiers are well-known today). The government's misleading statements are denounced ironically; this is the case with the warning that follows: "Also, in the very year in which Catholic and Greek Catholic priests filled the prisons and churches were confiscated, it is simply stated: '*religious communities enjoy freedom of worship and are provided with the necessary premises and property*'"³⁸.

The ironic reference to the written text is not limited to political discourse, but also occurs in personal documents. An example of this is found in the family correspondence: it is a letter from her father, a doctor forced to work at Canalul Dunăre-Marea Neagră at the age of sixty, where health problems caused him great discomfort. Reading this correspondence, Annie Bentoiu will add, in a sadly ironic note, by taking up one of the famous expressions of the regime and turning it into the subject of a rhetorical question: "What 'work productivity' must those poor toothless sexagenarians have had on the building sites?"³⁹. A similar situation is recorded on the occasion of her father's return home, followed by his obligation to practice medicine exclusively in the countryside: "With naive pride, my father showed us that his population certificate did not mention D.O. (mandatory residence). What use was that if he was not allowed to live anywhere else?"⁴⁰.

Among the fragments that ironically interpret situations of the time, symptomatic of a disproportionate relationship between appearance and essence, I recall the episode called "Festival Fast", an opportunity to point out, with bitter irony, the paradox of reality in communist society. The event is meant to show foreigners the "well-being" of Romanians, while they themselves are subjected – by force – to abstinence from food, as food is no longer sold. In this context, a possible solution relies on the same appearance-essence approach, through disguise:

In August, when it started [the "Festival Fast" – my note C.S.], the food shops, practically empty, did their best to organise their shop windows with what they had saved. This was an extra hardship for the people of Bucharest, because the goods in the window were not for sale. Aunt Aline and a friend of hers went around the shops, dressed as modernly as possible and chattering in French, in the hope that they would be taken for strangers and not refused a few things. If I remember correctly, they had some success⁴¹.

³⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 431: "De asemenea, în chiar anul în care preoții catolici și greco-catolici au înțesat închisorile și bisericile au fost confiscate, se declară simplu: '*comunitățile religioase se bucură de libertatea cultului și dispun de localurile și bunurile necesare*'".

³⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 532: "Ce 'productivitate în muncă' or fi avut pe șantiere acei bieți sexagenari fără dinți?"

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 668-669: "Cu naivă mândrie, tata ne arăta că pe buletinul său de populație nu figura mențiunea D.O. (domiciliu obligatoriu). Ce folos, dacă nu i se îngăduia să locuiască în altă parte?"

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 639-640: "În august, când a început desfășurarea propriu-zisă a acestuia [a 'Postului Festivalului' – my note, C.S.], magazinele alimentare, practic goale, și-au dat toată osteneala să-și organizeze totuși vitrine cu ce puseseră deoparte. Aceasta a fost pentru bucureșteni o suferință în plus,

The same contradiction emerges in the following fragment, built around the motif of the *hunger* of the 1950s:

You went in – you watched – the shopkeeper watched you – and you came out. Two less desired goods had stayed in the shops, decorating the shelves with their neatly spaced presence: they were boxes of toothpicks and jars of mustard, auxiliary products that no one wanted because the main element that would have made them necessary was missing⁴².

Comic but ironic (and therefore critical) events are recorded as testimony to the complexity of the epoch. They can explain some of the most absurd and difficult contexts, while remaining ridiculous, as in the case of the arrested baker who tells his story while weeping:

I'm a confectioner by trade, I had a tiny shop and I sold sweets, some boxes of the best Turkish delight were in special demand, you don't know how good it was, tidy boxes, in nice paper wraps... I wanted to give praise to the regime as much as I could, and I wrote on the lid, on the top left, "Long live August 23!". Below that, in larger, gold letters, it said RAHAT [Turkish delight]. And they brought me here...⁴³.

The story of a neighbour explaining one manager's advice to the employees in his office is received with a more trenchant attitude: "*All right, tovărășelelor, I can see you're working, you're industrious, but why don't you go to the hairdresser's, put on a little lipstick, get a manicure now and again?*"⁴⁴ The answer, critical and ironic, is at the same time antiphrastic, as the author concludes that "it's an extraordinary experience to live in a regime where you are told when to use lipstick and when not to..."⁴⁵.

pentru că mărfurile din vitrină nu se vindeau. Tante Aline și o prietenă a ei au colindat atunci prăvăliile, îmbrăcate cât mai modern cu puțință și sporovăind între ele în limba franceză, cu speranța că vor fi luate drept străine și nu li se va refuza să cumpere câte ceva. Dacă-mi amintesc bine, mici succese au avut".

⁴² *Ibidem*, p. 502: "Intrai – priveai – vânzătorul te privea și el – și ieșeau. Rămăseseră în magazine două mărfuri mai puțin căutate, care decorau rafturile cu prezența lor, ordonat distanțată: erau cutii de scobitori și borcanele cu muștar, produse auxiliare pe care nu le voia nimeni pentru că lipsea elementul principal, cel care le-ar fi făcut necesare".

⁴³ In Romanian, the Turkish delight is called "rahat turcesc". The same word can be used with a pejorative meaning and this is why, due to an absurd misunderstanding, the confectioner was put in prison for offending the political system – *Ibidem*: „Eu de meserie sunt cofetar, aveam o prăvălioară și vindeam dulciuri, mai ales aveau căutare niște cutii cu rahat din cel mai bun, nu știți ce bun era, cutii dichisite, cu hârtie frumoasă... Am vrut să aduc și eu laudă în cinstea regimului, după puterile mele, și am scris pe capac, sus în stânga, 'Trăiască 23 august!'. Mai jos, în litere mai marișoare, de aur, scria RAHAT. Și m-au adus aici...".

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 570: "*Bine, tovarășelelor, văd că lucrați, sunteți harnice, dar de ce nu vă mai duceți și voi pe la coafor, nu vă dați cu un pic de ruj, nu vă mai faceți câte o manichiură?*".

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 570: "este o experiență extraordinară să trăiești într-un regim în care ți se spune când să folosești rujul de buze și când nu...".

A very different and subtle irony, imbued with sadness, is outlined in the episode of the investigation of Aurelian Bentoiu's detention, based on documents from his *Securitate* file. A former minister of justice, imprisoned without any solid evidence, he becomes the character of a very interesting case, in which irony arouses neither laughter nor tears, but rather compassion. Aurelian Bentoiu's young "friend"⁴⁶, a false cellmate whose real identity is that of an informer, in his attempts to question his victim, obtains from the latter, sincere in his intentions, promises of help, which he later reports: "*He told me to ask Rădulescu-Dobrogea at the trial and when I get in touch with him at the registry to tell him that I am Bentoiu's man, and to ask him to pay the bar association's fee for me, and they would talk about this when they get out of prison.*"⁴⁷. "Bentoiu's man" is, in fact, his executioner!

Finally, I will consider the fragments in which the presence of irony concerning oneself can be identified. The first example is built around the second leitmotif of the epoch, the cold. It is a personal story, inspired by the delivery of the wood needed to heat a family's room: "I can see myself returning home on a Sunday evening after a wait that began at five in the morning, riding on the back of a carriage with the 500 kg of wood from the 'second parcel' that was granted to us: I was a victorious general, bringing home his prize, to the joy of all"⁴⁸.

This ability to detach and not take the burden of one's own life too seriously is proving to be extremely useful, even beneficial, in a historical era marked by restrictions and absurdities. The profound paradox that marks the youth of Annie Bentoiu and those around her (starting with Pascal Bentoiu, continuing with Marta Cozmin and Mircea Alexandru Pop, for example) appears in these memoirs, in the clearest ironic way, towards the end, summing up the years of her youth, a time that oscillates between what is and what is not to be regretted. When asked "What does your father do?", the answer of the pupil Ioana Bentoiu is simple and "victorious": "He is a composer!" But when asked the next question: "And your mother?", the child answered: "My mother? She's a cook and a 'dactolygrapher'..."⁴⁹. In recording this dialogue, Annie Bentoiu shows a detached

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 750: "amic".

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*: "*Mi-a spus că să cer pe Rădulescu-Dobrogea la proces și când oi lua legătură cu el la grefă să-i spun că sunt omul lui Bentoiu, iar taxa baroului să o pună de la el, că se vor socoti ei amândoi când or ieși afară*". There is a fine irony even in this candid way in which the prisoners received their own denunciators.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 504: "Mă văd când vreau, întorcându-mă într-o duminică seara după o așteptare începută la cinci dimineața, cocoțată pe capra unei căruțe în care se aflau cele 500 kg de lemne din 'tranșa a doua' cuvenită nouă: eram un general victorios, ce-și aducea acasă prada, spre bucuria tuturor".

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 815: "— Ce e tatăl tău? — E compozitor! — Și mama? — Mama? E bucătăreasă și 'dactoligrafă'...". This type of irony also appears in other similar episodes. With reference to the typist's job, I recall Annie Bentoiu's attempt to get a job and the requirement that she should submit seven references "only from party members" ("numai de la membri de partid"). Her commentary

awareness of herself, of her own professional unfulfillment⁵⁰, of the constraint (and “restraint”) of typing for years and of remaining only an “autodidact”, despite her high intellectual capacities⁵¹. Even this “modest” mission is distorted in the child’s voice⁵² – the irony all the more delicate – just as a destiny with enormous potential has been completely transformed by the whirlwind of history that influenced it. We read in this ironic line both bitterness and dignity as two sides of the same coin: the refusal of any compromise that would have allowed a higher social status⁵³. However, although the regime, in its thirst for power, tramples on individual destinies, it is precisely these that prove, over time, to be the most relevant in terms of value. Along Annie Bentoiu’s path, human dignity is fully defined when the person becomes aware of a fundamental existential point: the establishment of one’s own intellectual, moral and Christian values and the formulation of one’s own beliefs that save them at an inner level, while condemning them at an outer level⁵⁴. In the gap between these personal beliefs and the external laws, the practice of humour and irony can play a central role: “Through irony we can discern the meaning or significance of a context without taking part in it or engaging with that context”⁵⁵. Irony can be identified here both at the level of the literary formula and at the level of a personal approach to one’s own history. In the end, this “mother” is much more than a typewriter, for the text of her memoirs and her rich inner world do her justice. There is, therefore, something noble in this humility, reminding us that human identity lies first and foremost in the soul, and not in the external conditions imposed on man by the system. Together with Annie Bentoiu’s other literary works, her memoirs become a mirror and a fruit of this world hidden behind an interrupted, fragmented

points out, “Still, still... seven party members for one poor typist.... It took me a while to realize that he was mocking me” – *Ibidem*, p. 440: “Totuși, totuși, șapte membri de partid pentru o biată dactilografă... Mi-a trebuit câtva timp ca să înțeleg că-și bătuse joc de mine”.

⁵⁰ Giving up studies is a personal decision in the face of history and involves giving up a vocation. At the beginning of the 1950s, it was impossible for the author to go back to studying literature and law: “The roads were closing. The best years were passing, the years in which my memory, my understanding, my assimilation faculties were still working well” – *Ibidem*, p. 592: “Drumurile se închideau. Anii cei mai buni treceau, cei în care mi-ar fi funcționat încă bine memoria, înțelegerea, facultățile de asimilare”.

⁵¹ *Ibidem*, p. 815. Since 1960, Annie Bentoiu has been a contributor to the French version of the *Revue roumaine*. Later, she would publish various translations and literary works (particularly in French), but would give up the idea of writing a novel about life under communism in favour of these memoirs – *Ibidem*, p. 816.

⁵² “Dactoligrafă” is a distorted form of “dactilografă” (dactylographer).

⁵³ In a dictatorial system, personal events are conditioned by political decisions. The firm moral principles and the families that both Annie and Pascal Bentoiu come from become the reason for the social stigma they suffer.

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 574-575.

⁵⁵ Claire Colebrook, *Irony*, p. 3.

existential path, which may seem incomplete on the outside, but which is remarkably coherent on the inside.

Interpretations and Conclusions

The fragments discussed above illustrate various forms of irony and fall under two purposes of irony. Subtle or sharp, explicit or merely insinuated, more easily or more difficult to read, irony is, in this memorialist discourse, a concrete way of engaging with the political regime and a critical way of revisiting the realities of the time⁵⁶. In the landscape of a world founded on hatred and falsity⁵⁷, escapes are only possible through such “deviations” or “fissures”. But also after the falling of communism, recalling the past through memoir writing involves an ironic detachment from one’s own dissappointments, hardships and failures. The affective and therefore evaluative or critical charge of irony is all the more powerful the more significant its functions become. The evaluative scale proposed by Linda Hutcheon assumes different degrees of intensity of irony identifiable at the discursive level⁵⁸. Thus, irony can have a ludic function, to which are subscribed comic and humorous fragments, anecdotes and jokes, critically inoffensive, that arouse *laughter*. On a higher level, irony with a distancing function is intended to allow a positive perspective on situations and a certain detachment in communicating them through writing. Fragments where irony is self-directed, producing *smiles*, can be included in this category. Inevitably, there is also an irony in such discourse that is specific to those who have suffered some form of political oppression; this is irony with a defensive, self-protective and auto-immunizing function. Probably most of the fragments selected above also fall into this category, serving a defensive function in the face of a rigid, absurd and inhuman regime. Articulated as a response to this reality, the ironic attitude seeks not only to evaluate but also to correct, aspiring, in fact, to restore a righteous mentality. Annie Bentoïu’s memoirs are an example in favour of using irony – along with other discursive solutions – in contexts where people have to deal with trauma and suffering.

At a human level, irony can suggest finesse of character, gentleness, freedom or honesty. Although it portrays such a difficult period, the text also claims a humanity that can be discovered in every person or situation. The detachment and psychological finesse allow for an ironic insight; it is, however, a harmless, rather positively charged irony that was a justifiable constant of the epoch. The text has a

⁵⁶ Pierre Schoentjes, *Poétique de l’ironie*, p. 182.

⁵⁷ Annie Bentoïu, *Timpu’l ce ni s-a dat*, p. 266.

⁵⁸ Linda Hutcheon, *Irony’s edge*, pp. 43 and following.

precious documentary value but also a literary one, as it is written with the consciousness of the narrator telling (also) her own story.

Irony plays a significant role in the historical context described above and, later, in the context of the reception of these memoirs, because it requires a solidarity between the ironist and the interpreter, thus implying the idea of unity⁵⁹. By “capturing the discordance between the real world and the ideal world”⁶⁰, the appeal to irony can reveal some fundamental aspects of this inconsistency, because it challenges the utopian myth of communism and predicts, in a way, its failure. Already in 1829, Schlegel wrote that beneath the smiling appearance of irony lies a hidden meaning, a higher meaning, sometimes suggesting the most sublime seriousness⁶¹. This explains why, in Annie Bentoiu’s writing, irony is not only rhetorical; it often appears at the verbal level, but also at the situational level, sometimes rising to the level of a worldview, in order to allow a way of confronting historical reality and a key for its retrospective interpretation.

Hence, irony takes into account a political context and some social norms that citizens face, but also “a kind of stubborn hope”⁶² in the face of changes that overturn existence and that man cannot fully control⁶³. A deeper reading of this hope opens up avenues of interpretation to deeper areas of the human condition: reflections on how man actually seeks, through his irony, to regain his dignity and his status as a free human being – to make his own decisions, to define himself, to fulfil himself in accordance with what dwells within him. Consequently, irony has a capacity to transcend ideology⁶⁴ and simultaneously constitutes a way of recovering human dignity, particularly in regimes where fundamental human freedoms have been abrogated, thus becoming a weapon against the temptation to become paralyzed – especially inwardly – by the fact that everything seems fixed forever⁶⁵, in a perpetual state of desolation.

Finally, as a writing practice, the ironic “deviations” actually suggest a triumph, pleading that no time “that we were given”, however oppressive, however cruel, is deprived of the opportunity to complete the individual human destiny, insofar as man is willing to preserve, at all costs, his inner coherence. The firm decision in this regard is recorded in Pascal Bentoiu’s letters: “My dear, moral heroism is the only reasonable path left to us”⁶⁶. This path is also fundamental, for

⁵⁹ Corina Croitoru, *Politica ironiei*, p. 43. One of the functions of irony is actually recalling the fact that it is created by communities and can create communities – Linda Hutcheon, *Irony’s edge*, p. 51.

⁶⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 43.

⁶¹ Ernst Behler, *Irony and the Discourse of Modernity*, Seattle and London, University of Washington Press, 1990, p. 82.

⁶² Annie Bentoiu, *Timpul ce ni s-a dat*: “un fel de încăpățânată speranță”.

⁶³ Claire Colebrook, *Irony*, p. 13.

⁶⁴ Corina Croitoru, *Politica ironiei*, p. 43.

⁶⁵ Annie Bentoiu, *Timpul ce ni s-a dat*, p. 638.

⁶⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 325: “Dragă, eroismul moral e singura cale rezonabilă care ne rămâne”.

without a choice there is no responsibility and, consequently, no freedom. The sacrifice made in the name of inner coherence reminds us today of the importance of man as a unique and irreplaceable being. Annie Bentoïu shows us that during the communist regime irony was, along with other means of moral survival, a possible response to historical and personal reality, because it allowed the detachment necessary to keep human dignity untouched. After the Revolution of 1989, not subversive any longer but preserving its critical stakes, irony becomes a literary practice and thus a significant aspect of the discourse of the author's memoirs.

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FACETS OF IRONY IN COMMUNIST TESTIMONIAL LITERATURE. CASE
STUDY: ANNIE BENTOIU, *TIMPUL CE NI S-A DAT* [*THE TIME WE WERE
GIVEN*]
(Abstract)

Annie Bentoiu's memoirs, *Timpul ce ni s-a dat: Memorii: 1944–1959* [*The Time We Were Given: Memoirs: 1944–1959*] present an erudite, rigorously documented discourse, interwoven with a history of personal development. Rather sober and always lucid, the text contains, at times, notes of subtle irony, suggesting both a critical attitude towards the realities of the time (through the brief stories of people remembered) and a way of detachment from the hardships imposed by the totalitarian regime (through the literary practices chosen by the author). The starting point of this study is the concept of *semiotic cut* ("coupe sémiotique"), and its aim is to make a very precise selection of fragments in which ironic lines or attitudes can be identified either as an individual or collective response to the oppressions of the communist regime or as a retrospective interpretation of this specific historical context. The research involves three steps: the selection of this corpus, its analysis and its interpretation. Based on Leo Spitzer's stylistic studies, the discussion will also focus on irony as a *stylistic deviation* ("écart stylistique") from the general rules of this memoir discourse.

Keywords: irony, literary semiotics, stylistics, testimonial literature, communism.

FETELE IRONEI ÎN LITERATURA MEMORIALISTICĂ A COMUNISMULUI.
STUDIU DE CAZ: ANNIE BENTOIU, *TIMPUL CE NI S-A DAT*
(Rezumat)

Memoriile semnate de Annie Bentoiu (*Timpul ce ni s-a dat: memorii: 1944–1959*) se concretizează într-un discurs erudit, riguros documentat, împletit cu o istorie a devenirii personale. Mai degrabă grav, mereu lucid, textul prezintă, pe alocuri, note de subtilă ironie, semnalizând atât o atitudine critică cu privire la realitățile epocii, cât și un mod de detașare (sau dăinuire) în contextul regimului totalitar. Studiul pe care îl propun are ca punct de pornire noțiunea de decupaj semiotic (*coupe sémiotique*) și vizează o selecție foarte precisă a fragmentelor în care pot fi identificate replici sau atitudini ironice, cel mai adesea formulate ca răspuns, individual sau colectiv, la opresiunile regimului comunist. Cercetarea se desfășoară în trei pași, implicând alcătuirea acestui corpus, analiza și interpretarea lui. Pornind de la studiile de stilistică ale lui Leo Spitzer, ironia va fi discutată și ca abatere (*écart*) de la regulile generale ale discursului memorialistic citat.

Cuvinte-cheie: ironie, semiotică textuală, stilistică, memorialistică, comunism.

IOANA BOT

JOUER AVEC LE POÈTE EN PIERRE¹

Tel était le destin des statues, élevées sur des socles pour disparaître de la vue de ceux qui déambulent sur terre.

Mircea Cărtărescu, *Les Peaux*

Il y a un très grand coefficient de probabilité qu'un texte littéraire dégageant de métaphores contienne, cachée dans son sous-texte, une hypothèse théorique sur la littérature.

Monica Spiridon, *Melancolia descendenței* [*La Mélancolie de la descendance*]

Irony is essential. It's the sport of kings, and where we should make our home if we want to stay sane.

Neo Rauch, cité par Thomas Meaney, « The Antagonist »²

Un des traits caractéristiques de l'œuvre de Mircea Cărtărescu³ est constitué, sans aucun doute, par les rapports que celle-ci entretient avec le patrimoine littéraire roumain en son entier. Ce que l'on pourrait appeler à la va-vite « la littérature des précurseurs » s'y trouve sans cesse effleurée, citée ou paraphrasée lors d'un détail, d'un vers, d'un éclair métaphorique, qui se pose sans hésitation aux côtés de la catachrèse et du cliché poétique. Dès son début poétique (avec *Faruri, vitrine, fotografii* [*Phares, vitrines, photographies*] – volume paru en 1980), l'usage subversif de l'intertexte littéraire s'inscrit dans la signature de l'auteur. Souvent, au fil des livres, cette présence de la mémoire littéraire a été un des enjeux les plus importants de la poétique de Mircea Cărtărescu ; tel est le cas – pour ne citer que des titres accessibles récemment en traduction française – du

¹ Fragment d'une étude sur la poétique néoromantique de Mircea Cărtărescu, *Le jeu avec le poète en pierre*, en chantier.

² Thomas Meaney, « The Antagonist », *The New Yorker*, 2021, octobre 4, p. 25.

³ Mircea Cărtărescu (n. 1956) est un des plus connus écrivains roumains contemporains ; il a publié de la poésie, des romans, des essais, dont quelques-uns sont accessibles aux lecteurs francophones en traduction : *Orbitor, L'Oeil en feu, Pourquoi nous aimons les femmes, L'aile tatouée, Solénoïde, Le Levant, La Nostalgie*. Professeur de littérature roumaine à l'Université de Bucarest, il est lauréat de nombreuses distinctions littéraires, comme le prix Giuseppe Acerbi en Italie (2005), le prix international Spycher-Leuk en Suisse (2013), le prix Thomas Mann en Allemagne (2018), Formentor de las Letras en Espagne (2018), etc.

grand poème épique *Levantul* [*Le Levant*]⁴, dont le sujet est bien la persistance de la mémoire littéraire « classique », au fil des aventures d'un héros autant romantique (par son ardeur) que postmoderne (par son goût du bricolage livresque). Tel est aussi le cas du roman *Solénoïde*⁵, labyrinthe aux nombreux renvois livresques, au centre de l'aventure grandiose duquel le livre initiatique est bien le même livre de magie qui centrait, au XIX^e siècle, une des aventures romantiques les plus fameuses de la littérature roumaine – celle de Dionis, héros et alter-ego (lui aussi...) de Mihai Eminescu, dans la nouvelle *Sărmanul Dionis* [*Le Pauvre Dionis*]. Et ce n'est pas, là, un élément singulier, sinon le centre de tout un cosmos imaginaire, écrasant par ses proportions et sa tragique intensité, dont la visée métaphorique y est aussi pour signaler une certaine position par rapport à l'idée de littérature, comme « littérature de la mémoire de notre espèce ».

Les critiques ont été nombreux à s'appuyer sur cette relation compliquée de Mircea Cărtărescu avec ses précurseurs littéraires, afin de définir sa poétique ou d'y circonscrire des styles et des postures. Ainsi, par exemple, Radu Vancu, qui considère que ce rapport complexe fonde un véritable oxymore de la poétique de Mircea Cărtărescu. Il s'agirait d'une poétique qui serait, à la fois, postmoderne et maniériste, par « l'intertextualité énorme, inflationniste et galopante, que la littérature de Mircea Cărtărescu a la force de coaguler » aux côtés de (et en même temps que) « les narrations fantasmatiques, imaginatives et paranoïaques, et pourtant tellement hyper-réelles »⁶. Dans sa synthèse sur la poétique de Mircea Cărtărescu, Vancu enracine cet oxymore dans l'intertextualité, aussi bien que dans l'ironie – Mircea Cărtărescu ironiserait ainsi, en l'hybridant, la tradition poétique⁷, dans un volume comme *Le Levant*.

Notre hypothèse pose que c'est à l'aide de l'ironie que, du coup, l'oxymore arrive à s'équilibrer dans la poétique de Mircea Cărtărescu – et à assurer le fonctionnement singulier de celle-ci. Dans la descendance de la rhétorique romantique (que Mircea Cărtărescu revendique souvent), nous assumons que tout oxymore est, de par sa définition, ironique. Dans ce cas particulier, l'ironie viendrait se glisser dans la distance, dans la faille entre deux termes, poétiquement irréconciliables, composant l'oxymore : qu'il soit question de néo-romantisme et d'intertextualité, ou bien d'une présence de la mémoire culturelle et d'une innovation, de métaphore et de métonymie, de vers structuré (par un prédécesseur,

⁴ Dans la version originale, *Le Levant* est bien un poème, reprenant à son compte les différents « langages » de la poésie roumaine de ses origines au XX^e siècle. Pour que le livre soit traductible, l'auteur l'a réécrit en prose, et c'est cette variante qui est admirablement traduite en français par Nicolas Cavaillès (Paris, P.O.L., 2014).

⁵ Traduit du roumain par Laure Hinckel, le roman a été publié aux Editions Noir sur Blanc, en 2019.

⁶ Radu Vancu, *Elegie pentru uman. O critică a modernității de la Pound la Cărtărescu* [*Elegie pour l'humain. Une critique de la modernité de Pound à Cărtărescu*], București, Humanitas, 2016, p. 281.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 289.

et fameux avec ça...) et de vers libre... Le rapport du second terme de l'oxymore au premier reconnaît une filiation et, en même temps, instaure une relation décalée, « en commentaire », ironique. La littérature de Mircea Cărtărescu s'exerce à mettre ensemble des « intenables », et dans ses constructions complexes (pas tellement labyrinthes, sinon termitières, de l'aveu de l'auteur lui-même) l'ironie est la substance d'un pli éthique irréductible. Mais ce n'est pas sur *Le Levant* que nous allons focaliser notre démonstration.

En revenant sur cette présence unanimement reconnue de la mémoire culturelle/littéraire dans l'œuvre de Mircea Cărtărescu, nous voulons, d'abord, rappeler un détail essentiel pour notre démonstration. Il s'agit de *l'importance que Mircea Cărtărescu accorde à l'invocation de Mihai Eminescu, dans ses renvois à la mémoire culturelle roumaine*. Il y a, dans toute l'œuvre de Mircea Cărtărescu, un véritable défilé d'allusions culturelles, de citations et de relectures à rebours, de pastiches et d'autres figures pointant vers Mihai Eminescu, dans toutes les hypostases que ce grand poète romantique a connues au fil de sa postérité historique (et mythifiante)⁸. Eminescu est convié par des allusions intertextuelles à son œuvre, par des invocations de ses statues et d'autres « lieux urbains » dédiés à son nom, dans un discours tour à tour ludique, résistant⁹, métaphorique ou célébratif. En fait, la formule néoromantique qui caractérise la poétique de Mircea Cărtărescu est inéluctablement liée à ce dialogue perpétuel de l'auteur avec Eminescu, une véritable obsession de sa mémoire culturelle, mais une obsession capable de générer une littérature d'une indiscutable originalité. En clin d'œil à la tant clamée « anxiété de l'influence » qui caractérise le romantisme, Eminescu est présentifié comme source, repère culturel, modèle, compagnon et alter-ego. Mircea Cărtărescu en fait une profession de foi, lors d'une occasion particulièrement solennelle – lors de la réception du Prix National de Poésie « Mihai Eminescu », le 15 janvier 2017, lorsqu'il affirme : « Eminescu a toujours été et continue à être l'obsession de ma vie. Je crois qu'il n'y a pas d'autre écrivain roumain qui soit tellement fasciné – et, par ailleurs, imprégné – par Eminescu, comme je l'ai toujours été »¹⁰. L'attitude de Mircea Cărtărescu envers Eminescu revient à une archétypologie littéraire, qui fonderait sa vision du monde, résonnant avec la définition que Monica Spiridon donnait, dans son étude théorique fondamentale,

⁸ Une analyse détaillée de ces présences d'Eminescu dans l'œuvre en question, dans Rodica Zafiu, « De parcă un ochi s-ar putea vedea pe el însuși » [« Comme si un œil pouvait se voir »], in Cosmin Ciotloș, Oana Fotache, *Harta și legenda. Mircea Cărtărescu în 22 de lecturi* [La carte et la légende. Mircea Cărtărescu en 22 lectures], București, Muzeul Literaturii Române, 2020, pp. 144-173.

⁹ Nous avons discuté le recours intertextuel à Eminescu comme langage ésopique, de la résistance politique (pendant la dictature communiste roumaine), chez Mircea Cărtărescu et d'autres auteurs appartenant à la génération de 80, dans Ioana Bot, *Eminescu și lirica românească de azi* [Eminescu et la lyrique roumaine d'aujourd'hui], Cluj-Napoca, Dacia, 1990.

¹⁰ Mircea Cărtărescu, discours de réception reproduit dans la revue *Hyperion*, 35, 2017, 1-2-3, p. 12. Apud Rodica Zafiu, « De parcă un ochi s-ar putea vedea », p. 144.

Melancolia descendenței [*La Mélancolie de la descendance*], à cette figure particulière du cratylisme : il s'agit d'un monde

...marqué par la conscience de l'éternel retour ; accusant souvent la nostalgie de ses origines. Un univers de représentations cratylistes, regorgeant d'un métamorphisme herméneutique, obsédé par les dédoublements et les métamorphoses, plein de théâtralité et transformant l'éternel retour en sujet d'interprétation¹¹.

A notre avis, cette « obsession d'Eminescu », que Mircea Cărtărescu construit dans son œuvre, vient contrebalancer l'autre obsession, objectivée et pesante, de la mythification d'Eminescu en poète national, qui entrave l'histoire de la culture roumaine moderne, jusqu'à nos jours, et qui encourage un culte avec des conséquences culturelles aussi bien que politiques non-négligeables¹². Cărtărescu répond – subrepticement ironique, nous en sommes persuadés – à cette mythification – mais ce serait, là, un autre débat, portant sur d'autres formes que prend l'ironie (romantique) chez l'auteur qui nous intéresse ici.

Tout ce détour nous était nécessaire afin d'argumenter notre lecture de la nouvelle *Pieile* [*Les Peaux*], sur laquelle nous focalisons dans ce qui suit. Car nous postulons que cette narration (plutôt courte, si l'on pense aux dimensions des derniers textes de Mircea Cărtărescu... *Solenoid* [*Solénoïde*] arrive à 790 pages grand format, en sa traduction française !) est, elle aussi, centrée par cette relation particulière de l'auteur avec Eminescu, et qu'elle vient ajouter au fil des formes de « l'obsession » encore d'autres, tout aussi riches – et tout aussi, inéluctablement, ironiques. Remarquons d'abord que, dans *Les Peaux*, Eminescu n'est point nommé ni ouvertement cité, ce qui est chose bien rare si l'on se rapporte aux habitudes des jeux intertextuels de Mircea Cărtărescu. Provocateur – et bon joueur, de son état – Mircea Cărtărescu s'essaie à une nouvelle stratégie, qu'il n'hésite pas à mettre en abyme dans une scène du récit, où le héros, Ivan (adolescent et alter-ego de l'auteur, comme il est souvent de connivence dans les écrits de Mircea Cărtărescu), joue à faire balancer sur son socle la statue du grand poète national – lait motif de ses errances dans la ville et maître initiateur dans l'aventure qui suivra – en puisant dans le scandaleux de son geste afin de mieux équilibrer une relation autrement fragile, celle entre le disciple et son maître – entre l'auteur et le poète national : « Surpris et joyeux, Ivan s'amusa un moment avec le poète en pierre, l'amenant presque à l'horizontale et le relâchant soudain pour le voir tourner dans

¹¹ Monica Spiridon, *Melancolia descendenței : figuri și forme ale memoriei generice în literatură* [*La mélancolie de la descendance : figures et formes de la mémoire générique dans la littérature*], Iași, Polirom, 2000, p. 118.

¹² Pour l'histoire de ce culte du poète national roumain, v. Ioana Bot (ed.), « Mihai Eminescu, poète national roumain ». *Histoire et anatomie d'un mythe culturel*, Cluj-Napoca, Dacia, 2001. Les lecteurs ne lisant pas le roumain sont encouragés à consulter, à ce sujet, l'article « Eminescu » (Ioana Bot), dans Joep Leersen (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Romantic Nationalism in Europe*, <https://ernie.uva.nl/viewer/p/21/56/object/131-158553>. Consulté le 1^{er} février 2022.

l'air fané avant de retrouver, au terme d'une longue précession, sa dignité statuaire »¹³. Ivan ne joue pas avec le poète, sinon avec sa version statufiée ; son aventure initiatique, au contraire, donnera vie au poète et brisera sa statue.

Le « poète national » dont il est question dans *Les Peaux* s'appelle Vasile Solitude, un patronyme pour le moins étrange en roumain (« *Singurătate* » – fr. *Solitude* – n'est pas un nom de famille possible en roumain) et ce n'est pas sa première occurrence dans la littérature de Mircea Cărtărescu. Il était nommé, déjà, dans un des *Sonnets* (cycle de poèmes des années 80), lors d'une scène de jalousie, dont la rhétorique excessive subvertissait son propre dramatisme :

tu pourrais trébucher sur le petit ploiești sorti se promener
sur barbu vâcărescu, au bras de la donzelle craiove dans un trench mauve, écrasant
tu pourrais faire l'amour avec monsieur vasile solitude, pleine d'envie...¹⁴.

Les vers appuient leur métaphore sur l'ambiguïté irrésolue entre les toponymes, les noms propres de figures historiques (Barbu Văcărescu) et de figures imaginées (Vasile Solitude) et l'usage de ces derniers comme des toponymes de la ville « où a lieu la scène ». Il n'est pas rare que, ailleurs, dans les poèmes d'amour de Mircea Cărtărescu, Eminescu intervient « explicitement » dans la scène, en tant que... rue au nom d'Eminescu, librairie, place de ville etc. La graphie aux minuscules amplifie, à son tour, cette ambiguïté. Son ubiquité – signe de l'obsession mythifiante du monde roumain – est utilisée par l'écrivain afin de subvertir ses références – et brouiller le monde. La même ubiquité caractérise Vasile Solitude dans *Les Peaux* – il est, tour à tour, nom d'un lycée, rue et statue, tous – portant le nom d'un ancien poète, que personne ne lit plus (sauf Ivan ?).

Qui est Vasile Solitude ?, c'est la première question qui s'impose à nous. Son nom juxtapose un prénom roumain très commun, ayant appartenu (entre autres) au premier poète national, héros et écrivain engagé de la Révolution de 1848, Vasile Alecsandri. Par un détour interprétatif particulier, dans la culture roumaine, aux alentours de la première guerre mondiale, Alecsandri allait « perdre » le titre de poète national, en faveur de Mihai Eminescu (qui le conserve jusque de nos jours). Dans le mental collectif actuel, « le poète national » roumain n'est autre que Mihai Eminescu, le non-nommé des *Peaux*. Et encore : « *Singurătate* » (fr. *Solitude*) est,

¹³ *Les Peaux* a paru en français dans le volume de Mircea Cărtărescu, *Mélancolia*. Traduit par Laure Hinckel, Paris, Editions Noir sur Blanc, 2021. Au moment de la rédaction de la première version de notre étude, la traduction française n'était pas encore publiée – et nous remercions ici la traductrice de nous avoir permis l'accès au PDF pré-éditorial du volume, que nous citons, donc, sans renvoi aux pages de l'édition finale. Sur la traduction du volume – une perspective insolite sur des questions que nous abordons aussi (thématisation, métaphores etc.) – à lire absolument le journal de Laure Hinckel, « Journal de *Mélancolia*, une traduction en confinement », <https://laurehinckel.com/journal-de-melancolia-une-traduction-en-confinement/>. Consulté le 1^{er} février 2022.

¹⁴ Mircea Cărtărescu, *Poezii* [Poésies], București, Humanitas, 2015, p. 244. La traduction des citations nous appartient, sauf mention explicite du traducteur.

comme je le disais, un patronyme impossible en roumain, où l'on n'admet pas de substantifs abstraits pour un tel usage. D'autre part, c'est bien un des substantifs essentiels de la vision poétique d'Eminescu – on peut le considérer comme une véritable signature stylistique de l'ancien poète. L'appareillement produit par Mircea Cărtărescu, entre le prénom du premier poète national roumain, et un substantif emblématique de l'œuvre du second poète national roumain, révèle au lecteur une étrange « impossibilité signifiante », construite sur plusieurs niveaux symboliques. Ironie implicite envers la figure du « poète national » et son importance dans la culture roumaine – la figure de Vasile Solitude dévoile?, dans *Les Peaux*, plusieurs niveaux de construction de la métaphore. Et, ce faisant, ré-orienter la perspective des lecteurs vers des hypothèses théoriques. Comme l'affirmait Monica Spiridon, « il y a un grand coefficient de probabilité qu'un texte littéraire regorgeant de métaphores contienne, chiffrée dans le sous-texte, une hypothèse théorique sur la littérature »¹⁵.

Ceci rend le nom du « poète statufié » pour le moins particulier, en ce qu'il fonctionne comme un écart poétique. Tout comme son personnage – une statue qui prend vie (selon un *topos* de la littérature universelle), un initiateur dans les rites de l'au-delà (qui sont aussi les rites de la Poésie), poète vénéré et... illisible, avant l'initiation proprement-dite du lecteur (et du héros, Ivan, son semblable...).

Aux côtés du nom pour le moins étrange de l'ancien poète, un autre élément central du récit est une poésie aux cadences classiques, que le héros s'exerce à lire sur la statue de Vasile Solitude, qu'il découvre parmi les souvenirs de jeunesse de sa mère, et qui semble définir l'atmosphère générale de la ville dans laquelle erre Ivan. Le poème, intitulé *Comment neige le destin ?*, se trouve au centre des découvertes que Ivan fait pendant son initiation (à la poésie, ainsi qu'à une autre dimension, transcendante et monstrueuse, du monde). La scène de la lecture du poème (un vrai moment culminant de la narration) est particulièrement dense du point de vue figural, et cela dans un récit qui fait preuve d'une densité métaphorique bien soutenue. S'y retrouvent des topoï tels que la lecture comme anamnèse, la découverte du secret (...de la mère du héros), l'accès à un monde autre, tous – flanqués par des commentaires qui situent le poème dans une doxa scolaire particulière. À quel entendeur ?

De retour du voyage initiatique (accompli en suivant Vasile Solitude), Ivan revient devant la statue de ce dernier :

Il essuya de nouveau, avec ses deux mains, le vert-de-gris sur la plaque en cuivre et, cette fois-ci, il put lire une inscription qui lui sembla au départ énigmatique et absurde. Il y était écrit en lettres inhabituelles, antiques, dessinées à l'équerre et au compas : « COMMENT NEIGE LE DESTIN ? » Et il se souvint aussitôt – et alors les

¹⁵ Monica Spiridon, *Melancolia descendenței*, p. 71.

pleurs le submergèrent de nouveau! – du célèbre poème de Vasile Solitude, dont la dernière strophe commençait ainsi.

Le moment – central dans l'évolution du héros – a tout le poids d'une scène de révélation. C'est là que les fils apparemment dispersés de la narration viennent converger, c'est là que Ivan découvre ce que « signe » son destin dans le monde : mère, poésie, amour, différents niveaux du réel auxquels il a accès etc. La scène de la lecture (...du poème gravé sur le socle de la statue) est aussi une scène de l'anamnèse, ce qui vient ajouter des contours platoniciens discrets à ce moment cathartique :

C'était celui qu'il avait récemment relu, dans le cahier de souvenirs de sa mère, des vers calligraphiés aux crayons de couleur et décorés d'oiseaux, de papillons et de fleurs, sur la page en face de sa peau translucide du temps où il n'était qu'un fœtus dans son ventre :

*Comment tombe le soir ? Le soir tombe lentement.
Le soleil se plie comme un mouchoir.
D'énormes mouches à gros yeux déploient sans discrétion
Des cartes d'état-major sur l'arbre et l'hôtel.*

*Arrivent les araignées et les crabes royaux.
Ils tissent une toile épaisse sur les cœurs et les paupières.
Les âmes transmigrent dans des cervelles égales
Posent des étoiles froides sur de transparentes étendues d'eau.*

Après deux autres strophes parlant de rivières magiques et de tombeaux de quartz, et de la folle concentration du crépuscule au sommet d'une tour, le poète concluait par des vers que tout élève connaissait par cœur et répétait de manière mécanique lorsqu'il passait au tableau, justement parce qu'ils étaient aussi absurdes que les comptines de leur enfance :

*Comment neige le destin ? Le destin neige en silence
Sur le et, sur le ni, sur le encore, sur le si.
Il les couvre d'un jamais d'argile
Prémonitoire et paradisiaque.*

Le poème en question est une création de Mircea Cărtărescu, « à l'intertexte difficile » : l'auteur réussit à lui donner un air de déjà vu qui trouble un lecteur roumain – sans citations, ni autre séquence d'intertexte, il a pourtant un air très connu... Mis en difficulté, comme le fut Ivan lors de sa découverte du texte, le lecteur est implicitement ironisé par l'auteur, car il doit s'avouer incapable de maîtriser le processus sémiotique de sa lecture. Le texte annonçait bien cela : ses vers sont « aussi absurdes que les comptines... ».

Au niveau des images, ce poème est bien peuplé par des symboles caractéristiques de la littérature de Mircea Cărtărescu (les insectes dominant le monde, visions du Paradis qui pourrait aussi bien être une espèce d'Enfer, visions et prémonitions etc.). Et pourtant, il ne semble pas neuf, au contraire. La sensation de déjà vu n'est pas due autant à la structure métrico-prosodique du texte (pourtant, classique – mais hyper usitée, aussi, dans la poésie roumaine moderne) quant à un pli logique particulier, qui soutient la métaphore principale, introduite par la question d'ouverture, « Comment neige le destin ? ». Dans cette question – ainsi que dans la réponse qui suit, *des sujets abstraits agissent tels les éléments de la nature, directement, sur des instruments grammaticaux de la langue* (« Comment neige le destin ? Le destin neige en silence/ Sur le et, sur le ni, sur le encore, sur le si... »), ce qui est logiquement impossible... Ou bien si... ? Le mélange des plans logiques donne le vertige. Et à quoi est-ce que cela ressemble ? De l'avis de Monica Spiridon, « Il n'est pas obligatoire que le texte se rapporte directement à un autre texte, avec lequel il afficherait une relation bilatérale », la caractéristique de la littérature cratyliste étant « d'entretenir une mémoire générique et [d']ouvrir l'horizon spatial d'une continuité en transformation »¹⁶. Mais ce type de construction poétique qui trouble les niveaux du réel, ainsi que la logique du discours, est instauré, dans l'histoire de l'imaginaire poétique roumain, par... Mihai Eminescu, dans les poèmes duquel la mer pensait des vagues, les rivières roulaient des chants paradisiaques, tout comme le ciel tonitruait des blasphèmes etc. Chez lui, pour la première fois, les éléments de la nature devenaient les « mots » d'un discours originaire, dans la langue parfaite, divine (...que le poète ne pouvait plus ressusciter). Et ils y « construisaient » le monde... aux côtés des instruments grammaticaux, dont la construction respective avait aussi besoin. Chez Eminescu aussi, c'est une structure métrico-prosodique consacrée qui tient ensemble ce genre de phrase « absurde comme une comptine » – tel dans l'atelier de ses projets construits sur la strophe saphique, que nombre de ses éditeurs ont considérés comme dépourvus de sens et de valeur littéraire, tandis qu'ils étaient, eux, particulièrement expérimentaux¹⁷.

Le rappel livresque de Mircea Cărtărescu, dans ce poème central du récit, propose une métaphore particulière du cratylisme : le lecteur spécialiste l'identifiera, le dilettante sera provoqué par la sensation de déjà lu, et restera prisonnier (sans réponse libératrice) de l'inquiétude.

Frustrant nos attentes de lecture, Mircea Cărtărescu ne nous livre pas, dans ce « poème de Vasile Solitude », un pastiche de Mihai Eminescu, comme il sait (d'ailleurs) si bien faire. Le scénario du récit, pourtant, l'aurait bien annoncé – les

¹⁶ Monica Spiridon, *Melancolia descendenței*, p. 42.

¹⁷ Nous avons discuté cet atelier poétique et le sens de son « inintelligibilité » dans Ioana Bot, *Eminescu explicat fratelui meu [Eminescu expliqué à mon frère]*, București, Art, 2012.

jeux du héros avec le vieux poète statufié auraient pu se diriger dans cette direction. Mais, au lieu de tout cela, Mircea Cărtărescu (dés)organise le discours poétique à l'image d'un trouble-logique « originaire », appartenant bien, celui-là, à Mihai Eminescu. C'est au lecteur de se reconnaître comme objet de l'ironie de l'auteur – *de te fabula narratur*. Comme dans toute littérature cratylique, le rapport des *Peaux* avec un paradigme fondé par Eminescu a

une valeur purement symbolique, évocatrice ; c'est un fait de représentation ou bien un effet perceptif. [...] La mémoire générique, l'intérêt pour la descendance se font noter à tous les niveaux du texte, soutenant un métaphorisme particulier et donnant naissance parfois à une mythologie cratylite, détectable chez la plus grande part des écrivains ayant une conscience aigüe de la succession¹⁸.

La métaphore centrale des *Peaux*, celle de la rupture logique qui confond les éléments naturels et les instruments du langage, le concret et l'abstraction (incarnée dans le poème de Vasile Solitude), fait écho à la façon dont Mircea Cărtărescu construit l'univers où vit Ivan, son héros, et dans lequel celui-ci arrive à la maturité, à la suite d'une initiation magique, imprégnée d'un romantisme visionnaire. Par des raccourcis fantasques, des passages secrets et des fentes dans le tissu logique de la narration, avec le support d'un fantastique déchaîné (en discours indirect libre...), le monde d'Ivan – et le monde de l'au-delà, auquel appartient Vasile Solitude – sont, eux aussi, construits « en rupture », hallucinants et escheriens. Le rêve romantique fonctionne en métaphore de *l'ars poetica*.

Cette version du romantisme (toujours redevable, dans sa consécration roumaine, à Mihai Eminescu) est reprise par Mircea Cărtărescu, au fil de ses écrits, comme un axe central de la construction de son propre monde imaginaire ; sa poétique prolonge, de nos jours, une survie intéressante du long romantisme du 19^e siècle et, ce faisant, elle ressort aussi aux forces ironiques que toute « mise en intertexte » ou « filiation cratylique » peut bien déchaîner. *Les Peaux* ne fait pas exception – sinon, la manière dont cela est réalisé représente une nouveauté par rapport à la galerie (ample) des moyens jusqu'ici consacrés par Mircea Cărtărescu.

La scène anamnétique de la lecture du poème *Comment neige le destin ?* par Ivan intègre, dans le récit des *Peaux*, toute une constellation d'autres symboles et allusions à l'œuvre de Mihai Eminescu, qui valent bien des analyses de détail : telle la « ville en fourmilière », les occurrences de la lune, la confusion des sens et l'immersion dans un état second, visionnaire, la solitude (sic !) du héros, la refonte du couple en être platonicien, originaire et parfait, le désordre des livres dans la chambre d'Ivan – et la liste pourrait continuer. Mais tous ces éléments appartiennent, eux, à un niveau cohérent en soi de la référentialité discursive, ils ne provoquent pas le genre de rupture logique entre les divers plans, entre le

¹⁸ Monica Spiridon, *Melancolia descendenței*, p. 39.

monde réel, celui imaginé et le langage censé les dire (à chacun sa forme !), comme le faisait cette poésie, le détenteur principal de l'ironie fondatrice du texte. A la fois « maniériste et confessif »¹⁹, selon Radu Vancu, incarnant donc un oxymore dans sa posture littéraire, Cărtărescu choisit de se mirer dans la figure du « poète national », à l'aide d'un « hybride implausible »²⁰ – le poème « absurde comme une comptine », mais dont la beauté nous est relayée par-dessus les ruptures de sens qui la fondent. Car tel est bien le pouvoir de la poésie et c'est bien là une histoire d'initiation, y compris d'une initiation aux pouvoirs constructifs de l'ironie.

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¹⁹ Radu Vancu, *Elegie pentru uman*, p. 308.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 308.

JOUER AVEC LE POÈTE EN PIERRE (Abstract)

The present study focuses on a short story by Mircea Cărtărescu, *Piele* [*The Skins*] (from the volume *Melancolia* [*Melancholy*], 2019), following the means of constructing poetic irony, on the thematic axis of a history about the initiation into literature, which offers a very rich gallery of images and metaphors for defining the literary lineage. Starting from Cărtărescu's characterization as one of the contemporary writers cultivating the most complex relations with his literary predecessors, a characterization that is often present in the scholarly literature, our reading aims to identify the new representational forms, offered by the text under scrutiny, of the descendance, influence, lineage and other "melancholic" situations which this famous contemporary writer now proposes, woven into a narrative whose classical patterns are, naturally, deceptive. From the literary cliché to the "melancholy of descendance", irony settles in the space produced by the reading distance, in the interval between a new work and its models.

Keywords: Cărtărescu, irony, melancholy of descendance, literary cliché, intertextuality.

JOCUL CU POETUL DE PIATRĂ (Rezumat)

Studiul de față se concentrează asupra unei nuvele de Mircea Cărtărescu, *Piele* (din volumul *Melancolia*, 2019), urmărind modalitățile de construcție a ironiei poetice, pe axa tematică a unei istorii despre inițierea în literatură, care oferă o galerie foarte bogată de imagini și metafore pentru definirea filiației literare. Pornind de la caracterizarea lui Cărtărescu ca unul din scriitorii contemporani cultivând cele mai complexe raporturi cu predecesorii săi literari, frecventă în studiile de specialitate, lectura noastră caută să identifice noile forme reprezentăționale, oferite de textul în discuție, ale descendenței, influenței, filiației și altor situații „melancolice”, pe care acest celebru scriitor contemporan le propune acum, țesute într-o narațiune ale cărei tipare clasice sunt, firește, înșelătoare. De la clișeu literar la „melancolia descendenței”, ironia se așază în spațiul produs de distanța lecturii, în intervalul dintre noua operă și modelele sale.

Cuvinte-cheie: Cărtărescu, ironie, melancolia descendenței, clișeu literar, intertextualitate.

CRISTIAN PAȘCALĂU

**POST-COMMUNIST IRONY AND ANTI-UTOPIA: THE
APARTMENT BLOCK AS A SPACE OF MARGINALITY
IN *SIMION LIFTNICUL* [*SIMION THE ELEVATOR MAN*]
BY PETRU CIMPOEȘU**

The perception of communism in the novels of the Romanian transition period is a theme inextricably linked to the resurrection of irony, which leads us to propose for analysis a novel whose epic core is life in the apartment block. Through the filters of authorial irony, the motif of the block as a space of marginality generated a revolution of writing techniques, offering the novelist the opportunity to explore the characters' obsessions in a tutelary setting. In the novel we analyse, the block works as a myth or urban symbol of degradation, as an inner setting of personal dramas or as a melancholic, neurotic or absurd mental reality.

Communism and Post-communism. Irony Enacted

With regard to communism, a scholar from Cluj once stated that “by deconstructing communism”, we have to “measure its radioactivity not in the ceremonial speeches that we give on several festive occasions, but in our microscopic gestures, in our common words and in our unrevealed thoughts”¹. Like all the other regimes of the European Eastern bloc, the communist regime in Romania is characterized by several key elements: a single doctrinal source, the economic pre-eminence over social life and the violent socialization of property, the unique and omnipotent political party, no separation of state powers, the ideological dogma and its extension in the sphere of all social relations, the unanimity principle imposed to every citizen, disregard for the fundamental rights and freedoms, the repressive apparatus involved in the entire social life, the cult of the infallible leader, the manipulation of the masses, the inoculation of suspicion and the severe cultural dirigisme.

The communist utopia extracts its substance from a matrix that irradiates propaganda, whose avatars persist in the rhetoric of cultural memory. In this sense, the communist dogma adopts simulacra of freedom and identity, speculating the

¹ Ciprian Mihali, “Avatarurile deconstrucției în Est” [“The Avatars of Deconstruction in the East”], *Echinox*, 34, 2002, 1-2-3, p. 14: “printr-o deconstrucție a comunismului [trebuie] să-i măsurăm radioactivitatea nu în discursurile ceremoniale pe care le ținem la atâtea ocazii festive, ci în gesturile noastre microscopice, în vorbele noastre comune și în gândurile noastre nemărturisite”. Unless otherwise stated, the quotations are translated into English by the author of this paper.

masses' desire for social equity. On this account, the ideal society is a closed system, purified and ideologically levelled, a monist homogeneous system establishing a guarantee of internal coherence which is actually imposed to all common citizens. Ever since its establishment in Romania, the local communist regime cherished the illusion of absolute legitimacy. Emil Cioran would note, in this respect, that "Utopia is a hypostasized illusion; communism, going even further, will be an illusion decreed, imposed: defying the ubiquity of evil, it is a *mandatory optimism*"². While abolishing illiteracy was one of the top priorities of the communist regime, the educational system took the form of a radical transformation operated in the consciousness of the individual, in the attempt to materialize an aberrant concept of the *new man*.

The discourse of propagandistic re-education acquires the valences of a rhetoric oriented towards the absolute, which imposes itself with overwhelming authority. The doctrinal construct becomes an effective means for the power to enslave society. Censorship was meant to deprive society of any foreign conceptions or representations that were not in line with the communist program. Terms such as *justice, righteousness, democracy, freedom, goodness, welfare* and so forth were trapped in the linguistic structures of the ideological apparatus and used without any practical purpose whatsoever. The fabric of reality, presented in the rhetorical package of the cliché, is the basis for expressing the unique thinking pattern. Repressions through censorship, intimidation, denigration, blackmail or violence lead to the annihilation of the critical, interrogative spirit. That is why the party only formally recognizes the value of public opinion. The civil society is almost non-existent. Effective communication between the ruling political power and the representatives of the society takes the form of hierarchical channelling, which greatly favours the dissemination of propaganda among the masses. From this point of view, there is no ontological right or wrong, no sin or fault, no divine authority above the political establishment. Furthermore, a situational form of ethics and double standard work massively in the communist regime, mixing both the perfidious mechanism of the oppressors and some of the victims' complicity.

The phenomenon was perpetuated insidiously for a long time after 1989, with the same negative consequences. Marked by apparent democratization and a supposed consecration of fundamental citizens' rights, the post-Decembrist Romanian society would be submitted to the same manipulation, oppression, and ideological censorship. Politically, behaviourally and mentally, it would remain connected to the ghosts of the communist doctrine. To this extent, history generates correlative realities in the field of literature: "both utopia and anti-utopia

² Emil Cioran, *Istorie și utopie [History and Utopia]*, București, Humanitas, 1992, p. 115: "Utopia este iluzia ipostaziată; comunismul, mergînd și mai departe, va fi iluzie decretată, impusă: o sfidare la adresa omniprezenței răului, un optimism *obligatoriu*".

rely on a firm oligarchic system, which has seized the place meant for God”³. Obviously, the historical utopia takes on “a non-hidden totalitarian character”, in the sense that “the good that utopia promises will be achieved through [...] the same design, uniformity, personality levelling and tireless control over the individual”⁴. As a matter of principle,

Negative utopia is an extreme form of the other [utopia]. [...] In fact, negative utopia only reveals what necessarily follows when leaders seek to systematize the future, to scientifically design goodness, to build an ideal world, to try to ensure (or impose) happiness at the collective level. Anti-utopia somehow pulls aside the curtain, betraying the histrionic character of the utopian discourse, its pernicious mirage once it is transformed into a historical act. As for the means of writing, anti-utopia reinstates proper narrative itself. It is much closer to the novelesque, even though, for the most part, it builds its world through the same reduced, apathetic means of description⁵.

Of course, one cannot deny the presence of anti- or counterculture movements against the official version implemented by the Communists. Those movements acted in various forms and at various levels of the civil society during Ceausescu’s regime. The need for freedom and communication led to the development of resistance cells which took different forms (dissent, protests and subversive prints), as a counterculture to the official version imposed by the regime. Ovidiu Pecican reviews several forms of underground protest: Neo-protestant movements; literary circles (especially the Sci-Fi phenomenon of the 80s); the transcendental meditation groups; the yoga movement. Between the lines, one can read an important conclusion: an exhortation towards the recovery of some aspects and values not infrequently disregarded when debating the phenomenon of ideology penetrating the masses during the pre-Decembrist dictatorship:

All these cores of emerging freedom of opinion and self-thought, erudition intertwined with good literary and artistic taste, have had a greater impact on the intelligentsia than is commonly thought in such a culture as the

³ Bogdan Crețu, *Utopia negativă în literatura română* [*The Negative Utopia in Romanian Literature*], București, Cartea Românească, 2008, p. 26: “și utopia, și antiutopia se bazează pe un sistem oligarhic ferm, care a acaparat locul cuvenit divinității”.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 28: “un neascuns caracter totalitar [...] acel bine pe care utopia îl promite se obține prin [...] aceeași planificare, aceeași uniformizare, nivelare a personalității, același neobosit control asupra individului”.

⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 28-29: “utopia negativă este o formă absolutizată a celeilalte [utopiei – n.n.]. [...] De fapt, utopia negativă nu face decât să dea în vileag ceea ce urmează în mod necesar atunci când liderii caută să sistematizeze viitorul, să planifice științific binele, să construiască o lume ideală, să încerce să asigure (sau să-i impună) colectivității fericirea. Antiutopia trage la o parte, într-un fel, cortina, trădând cabotinismul discursului utopic, mirajul pernicios al acestuia, după ce el a fost transformat în act istoric. În ceea ce privește mijloacele scriiturii, antiutopia repune în drepturi narațiunea propriu-zisă. Ea este mult mai apropiată de romanesc, chiar dacă, în mare parte, lumea și-o construiește tot prin mijloacele reduse, apatice ale descrierii”.

Romanian one, where literature and writers have always had priority in expressing authentic public trends, mediating between the powerful men of the day and society, unravelling the deep currents that penetrated the thought of a given age⁶.

The Romanian society will experience a paradoxical split in political terms after 1990. If, before 1990, the ruling power was omnipresent and omnipotent while the opposition acted at the peripheries of ideological irradiation centres, in relatively isolated points, after the execution of Ceausescu, when the new oligarchy overtook the political scene, those who wanted only a team change at the top of the same system would immediately restore their privileges. In order to maintain its direct and major interests, the old power, already metamorphosed, granted little access to a new political life. Thus, two planes or two realities of power were designed: an occult one, in which true power acts and little information can be outsourced, and a surface one, in which parliamentary democracy is mimicked. At the same time, post-Decembrist Romania suffers the shock of adapting to the new rules at international level. The political spectrum does not admit a way back: the sacrifices during communism will soon be replaced by poverty, manipulation, social sycophantism, theft of resources and fragmentation of the traditional values. Moreover, the high degree of confusion among the population, combined with the lack of the most elementary political culture, paved the way for the new oligarchs. Misunderstanding the new forms taken by the political life would cause citizens to be easily manipulated. Also the poor quality of the political staff, the lack of clarity or precision, the absence of strong political platforms or social programs caused the large majority of the electorate to form their options based on sympathy or antipathy for some notorious figures, rather than on information about political parties or movements. Each time the power and the opposition cannot perceive the need for partnership in the difficult process of fixing the course of society, they end up acting like inscrutable enemies. In its surface form, political power represents the projection of real power, serving onerous interests for those behind the scenes.

Under these circumstances, the mechanism of Romanians' social resistance during the communist period is perpetuated after the revolution of 1989, at different levels yet with approximately the same consequences. During the communist period, people were manipulated by the system, but at the same time

⁶ Ovidiu Pecican, "Societatea civilă în România ceașistă" ["The Civil Society in Ceaușescu's Romania"], *Tribuna*, 8, 2009, 154, p. 10: "Toate aceste nuclee de urgență a libertății de opinie și a gândirii pe cont propriu, a erudiției împletite cu bunul gust literar și artistic, au avut un impact mai mare decât se consideră îndeobște în rândul intelectualității, într-o cultură precum cea română, unde literatura și scriitorii au deținut mereu prioritatea în exprimarea tendințelor publice autentice, în medierea dintre putericiile zilei și societate, în deslușirea curenților profunde ce traversau gândirea dintr-o epocă dată".

they manipulated the system. Although the ideological system has created true resistance cells in the marginal spaces, which would carry the memory of the centre even after the latter eventually disappeared, daily resistance resurfaced. In order to better cope with the imperative of constant negotiation with the structures of the totalitarian regime, these structures did not pervade some discursive spaces so strongly, thus allowing some niches of subversion and alternative subjectivity. This mechanism implied the division of the social sphere into a public and a private one:

Activities, identities, and interactions can be separated into private and public parts, and each of these parts can be separated again, following the same public/private distinction. The result is that within any public sphere one can always create a private one; within any private sphere one can create a public one. [...] Another way to say this is that every day public and private distinctions – whether of activities, spaces, or social groups – are subject to reframing and subdivisions in which part of what is public is redefined as private, and vice versa”⁷.

The implications were not difficult to predict: false reporting and statistics, public lying, purposely misleading, duplicity elevated to the rank of ordinary practice. The dual fragmentation of the self into public and private causes a correlative fragmentation of discursive instances. While the public self is engaged in the act of carrying out individual work under the directives of power – of course, by appropriate speech and behaviour – the private self is withdrawn into the depths of the mind, acting as a second nature, an internalization of individual thinking. Duplicity can be the foundation for discursive and cultural practices defining the case of the Romanian communist space. In response, new forms of counterculture would eventually appear: “[...] popular culture is a biopolitical space created in the private/public spheres of civil society, from where it stems out as a form of reactive energy and a counter-hegemonic cultural moment challenging a dominant, authoritarian political society and its hegemonic, official cultures”⁸. The blue jeans generation and the PRO generation are forms of urban popular counterculture, expanding nuclei of identity and resistance emerging directly from post-communism. Various resistance movements of the young generation voiced real counterarguments to the status quo of society. Hip-hop music is a catalyst among others that culminated with the anti-globalist protests of the 2000s.

Taking into account this economic and political background, it comes easy to understand why irony plays a capital role in shaping the Romanian post-communist society and its cultural and artistic environment. In the following

⁷ Susan Gal, Gail Kligman, *The Politics of Gender after Socialism. A Comparative-Historical Essay*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2000, p. 41.

⁸ Denise Roman, *Fragmented Identities. Popular Culture, Sex, and Everyday Life in Postcommunist Romania*, Lanham, Lexington Books, 2007, p. 26.

paragraphs, we revisit several theoretical frames on irony, in order to further explore Cimpoeșu's novel as a skeptical-ironic metonymic projection of the transition from communism to capitalism.

Irony entangles various aspects that can be outlined depending on what level of analysis and interpretation we place ourselves at. Comprehensive research⁹ on irony and its literary hypostases has been common over the last decades of the past century and onward, following linguistic, pragmatic, semiotic, aesthetic, and stylistic conceptual framings. From a pragmatic perspective, irony is defined as a meta-communicational process¹⁰ or as a discursive phenomenon consisting in apparently embracing a point of view just to further dismantle it by placing it in a context that determines its absurdity, grotesqueness or mere inadequacy. In this way, the speaker dissociates himself from his statement and reveals his genuine point of view, which, apart from always being the opposite of the content stated, is necessarily oriented towards a negative conclusion:

Irony consists in rejecting the responsibility of what is expressed on an enunciator to whom the speaker pretends to identify with, only to oppose and target him. [...] By pretending to adhere to the point of view of others, the ironist aims on the one hand to target others by definitively rejecting the point of view or the statement which he echoes, and on the other hand to communicate his own point of view by means of antiphrasis¹¹.

Irony presupposes clichés and exaggerations that function as a type of quotation designers, in which even the suspension points, the quotation marks, the italics, the oxymoron (which combines two contradictory terms and forces the receiver to build two incompatible semantic universes, among which there is no possibility of conciliation except as a reflex of the ironic intention of the speaker), the combination of disparate ideas (which also reveals the incongruity of the semantic universes depicted), or the cliché (abstract referents are rendered automatically, creating an ideology out of phrases without words) are rendered as specific elements of the stereotypical pre-construct¹². The first enunciator builds an overloaded stereotypical context by virtue of which the speaker creates a distance

⁹ It is worth mentioning D.C. Muecke, *The Compass of Irony*, third edition, London and New York, Routledge, 2020, a study in which irony is tackled as a cultural phenomenon; Linda Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge. The Theory and Politics of Irony*, London and New York, Routledge, 1995, a study that regards irony in its semantic and discursive specificity, communicative features and trans-ideological status; Wayne C. Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony*, Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 1975.

¹⁰ Alain Berrendonner, *Eléments de pragmatique linguistique*, Paris, Minuit, 1981.

¹¹ Laurent Perrin, *L'ironie mise en trope*, Paris, Kimé, 1996, p. 176: "L'ironie consiste à rejeter la responsabilité de ce qui est exprimé sur un énonciateur auquel le locuteur ne feint de s'identifier que pour s'y opposer et le prendre pour cible. [...] En prétendant adhérer au point de vue d'autrui l'ironiste vise d'une part à prendre autrui pour cible en rejetant définitivement le point de vue ou le propos auquel il fait écho, et d'autre part à communiquer son propre point de vue par antiphrase".

¹² Jacqueline Authier-Revuz, "Hétérogénéité énonciative", *Langages*, 19, 1984, 73, pp. 98-111.

between the situation and the actors of the statement uttered. This sharp connectedness of the entities involved in the discourse is noticed by previous researchers, who argue that irony can mix superlative utterances¹³, false paradoxes and so forth, placing under suspicion a variety of states of affair and permanently superposing the meta-discourse upon discourse¹⁴. In this way, the line between mention and use is erased, whereas the confusion between enunciation and statements tends to create loops in the actual universe of discourse.

The many occurrences of the oxymoron, zeugma, paradox, antithesis, and antiphrasis achieve the effect of keeping the receiver in a state of permanent alert, which allows him to build, under the surface, a deep semantic universe by balancing antinomies against the discursive surface. It is precisely in this balance that lies the mechanism by which irony acquires its specificity¹⁵. Hence its privileged operator would be antiphrasis, even if other operators intervened. Irony is a complex and integrative discursive pattern, in the sense that it incorporates various instances and can take various forms of manifestation. As antiphrasis consists in using words with meanings contrary to the global textual sense, this process can be equally well applied to appreciation and devaluation. Moreover, antiphrasis camouflages a negative judgment under a positive-oriented statement and generates a form of inverted irony consisting in flattering someone by playing the comedy of blame. The high degree of negativity that irony normally masks is sometimes shown through a negative operator inserted at the surface level of the utterance. But when negativity is masked, the path of interpretation that claims to release ironic meanings proves all the more complex. This is due to the fact that, in its positive form, the ironic meaning emerges only after some internal paraphrasing and re-contextualizing operations take place at some prior levels of interpretation. The irony forces the receiver to convene and stage a conceptual universe that is not only contrary to the one advanced by the apparent speaker, but also overloaded with negativity.

If the trope value of irony resides in its spectacular path of interpretation, it should be noticed that this journey will vary in its effects once the receiver is in the position of victim or observer. The “theatre of words” put into play by irony is virtually indefinite, a double discourse issued by a doubled enunciator¹⁶ for an external audience divided, to the same extent, between those who interpret the

¹³ Catherine Kerbrat-Orecchioni, M. Le Guern, P. Bange, A. Bony (eds.), *L'ironie*, Lyon, Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 1978, p. 34.

¹⁴ Dominique Maingueneau, *Pragmatică pentru discursul literar [Pragmatics for Literary Discourse]*. Translated by Raluca-Nicoleta Balațchi, preface by Alexandra Cuniță, Iași, Institutul European, 2007, p. 212.

¹⁵ See, in this respect, Christian Vanderdorpe, “Notes sur la figure de l’ironie en marge de *La Clutte* d’Albert Camus”, *La revue canadienne d’études rhétoriques*, 2001, 12, pp. 43-63.

¹⁶ Carmen Vlad, *Textul-aisberg. Elemente de teorie și analiză [The Iceberg Text. Elements of Theory and Analysis]*, Cluj-Napoca, Echinoc, 2000, pp. 101-102.

message adequately and those who interpret it literally¹⁷. To understand it, irony does not only require a subtle way of playing with words and specific knowledge of a particular culture; it also requires information about the relations that the speaker maintains with the group targeted by his speech. When the target coincides with the receiver, irony produces a punitive effect, forcing the ironized to apply an operator of negation to the positive terms in which the statement is uttered and, therefore, trigger the cognitive process of its own devaluation. Should the target be dissociated from the receiver, the effect of irony will give the latter the opportunity to sympathize with the speaker at the expense of the one who is actually the subject matter of the ironic statement. From this perspective, irony is undoubtedly linked to cultural stereotypes and knowledge shared by a particular group or community of speakers. Under a seemingly positive and difficult-to-attack literal statement, irony reveals the ridiculousness of an opponent who has no time to retaliate. Therefore, irony invades and corrodes the entire discursive space, saturating it with negativity.

All these facts are more or less identifiable in the novel. As a kind of witness involved and detached at the same time, Cimpoeșu either declares from time to time that he does not know what is happening next, or he anticipates and tells us directly from the beginning how an action will conclude. Paradoxically, Petru Cimpoeșu's satire lacks vehemence. The narrator's tone has a conspiratorial air and he juggles with the information he offers to the readers, giving them the impression that he could say more, but either things are not important or the details will be disclosed at the right time. Cimpoeșu's humour is liberating and merges the aesthetic categories of tragic and comic as two complementary facets of one and the same reality. It is a cathartic kind of humour generated by the grotesque, which, with its existential mind-blowing turn of events, hides an inner space constantly devastated by chimeras. In this respect, Alex Goldiș argues the following:

If there is a *Weltanschauung* of the Romanian transition period, it would be found in its entirety in Cimpoeșu's imaginary. *Simion liftnicul* is neither a postmodern novel, nor a novel of the '80s, but a human comedy of characters who populate the post-revolutionary world. Closer to Balzac than to Caragiale in creating types (the irony of the prose writer is not sharp, but pathetic and sentimental), Cimpoeșu is the fanciful archivist of the "new humanity" after the '90s¹⁸.

¹⁷ Philippe Hamon, *L'ironie littéraire*, Paris, Hachette, 1996, p. 56. See also Ștefan Oltean, *Introducere în semantica referențială* [Introduction to Referential Semantics], Cluj-Napoca, Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2006, p. 199, who argues that irony is a symptom of plurivocality, linking it to the intentionality of the speaker and the truth values of one's statements.

¹⁸ Alex Goldiș, "Elegie pentru optzecism" ["Elegy for the 1980s"], *Cultura*, 2008, 186, <https://revistacultura.ro/nou/primele-editii/?idart=2166>. Accessed October 21, 2021: "dacă există un *Weltanschauung* al perioadei românești de tranziție, el e de regăsit, pe de-a-ntregul, în imaginarul lui

The author “remains an atypical writer of the ’80s due to at least three elements: he is a self-made-man and an outsider, he experienced a revelation of a mystical-religious sort [...], and he wrote the most iconic novel of the transition period”¹⁹.

The sphere of irony is related to the “second-order empathy”²⁰ and ambiguity which are typical for such a novel. Firstly, we are talking about allusive irony, which on the one hand plays on the complicity between the author and the readers, and on the other hand presupposes a convergence between several levels of knowledge, an “axiological alignment”²¹ reflected in the negative evaluation of the facts either presented as such, or partially hidden in the depths of the textual meaning. Secondly, we refer to direct irony, through which the situations confronted on the surface of the textual meaning, without euphemistic fuss, divert the levels of knowledge and the axiological evaluation. In either case we have to admit that, from the point of view of novelistic creativity, the contribution of irony is overwhelming. The verbal and the situational irony, unified in a single field of representation, pinpoint the social stereotypes and conventions assumed at the collective level to unmask not only a disturbed background directly derived from the socio-economic status (the Romanian post-communist transition), but also the individual vices, maintained through the projections of a false kind of national psychology, structured and carried by rhetorical clichés established in advance in the collective imaginary.

However, the capital merit of Petru Cimpoeșu is, in our opinion, that of having enacted, with incomparable aesthetic virtues, a spectacle of masks in the museology of the grotesque, dismantling numerous metaphors-cliché expressing the nationalist perception regarding what is usually considered the daily reality of our lives and the attitude towards it. In this respect, we can read the novel as “a mirror for the imaginary of our identity”²², as it „exhibits identity projections that

Cimpoeșu. *Simion liftnicul* nu e un roman postmodern sau optzecist, ci o comedie umană a caracterelor care populează lumea postrevoluționară. Mai apropiat de Balzac decât de Caragiale în crearea tipurilor (ironia prozatorului nu e tăioasă, ci patetică și sentimentală), Cimpoeșu e arhivarul fantezist al ‘noii umanități’ de după ’90”.

¹⁹ Cristina Timar, “Cotidian și metafizică în *Simion liftnicul* de Petru Cimpoeșu” [“Quotidian and Metaphysics in Petru Cimpoeșu’s *Simion liftnicul*”], *The Proceedings of the “European Integration – Between Tradition and Modernity” Congress*, 2009, 3, p. 457: “rămâne un optzecist atipic prin cel puțin trei componente: e un autodidact și un outsider, a trecut printr-o experiență revelatoare de ordin mistic-religios [...], a scris cel mai reprezentativ roman al perioadei de tranziție”.

²⁰ Dirk Geeraerts, “Second-order Empathy, Pragmatic Ambiguity, and Irony”, in Augusto Soares da Silva (ed.), *Figurative Language – Intersubjectivity and Usage*, Amsterdam and Philadelphia, John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2021, pp. 19-40.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 33.

²² Anca Ursa, “Românii – proiecții identitare” [“The Romanians – Identity Projections”], in Corin Braga, Elena Platon (eds.), *Enciclopedia imaginariilor din România*, vol. II. *Patrimoniu și imaginar*

are identifiable in precise epochs, places, and circumstances”²³, suggesting perceptive labels that reach not the ethnic or national essence, but the ideological illnesses and the linguistic obsession for “collective delusions”²⁴. The authorial strategies in this regard are diverse, from the use of verbal or adverbial expressions of modality by means of which marks of irony are assigned, to the opposite situations that shock the natural order of things, generating an overwhelmingly comical mood: “The essence of ethical irony lies in the relation of the subject to life and to the concrete routine”²⁵, and “it has both a logical side, one of transmitting a sense that is contrary to the one expressed, and an axiological dimension, one of evaluating the persiflage of the object, which betrays, without exception, an idealistic aspiration [...] as a worldview”²⁶.

Post-communist Anti-utopia: the Block as a Space of Marginality

Petru Cimpoeșu’s novel (2001), a brilliant radiography of the Romanian society in the first post-Decembrist decade, shows a sceptical-ironic projection in the slipstream of anti-utopia, exploring some ordinary people’s lives caught in a bizarre world. They are tenants of a block of flats, whom we may recognize every day on the street, in shops, at the market, and so on. The author describes their life problems and soul struggles in metaphysical terms loaded with intellectual flavour. In this respect, the novel is a fresco in which the Romanian transition period is exhibited in all its essential aspects, from the marginal spirit of the city, drowned in provincialism and under-education, to the urgent problems regarding politics and religion that grind society²⁷. The characters illustrate a society from the late ’90s, whose attitudinal and behavioural atavisms we are still able to perceive today, more than 30 years after the revolution. Incidentally, the characters and the

lingvistic [*The Encyclopaedia of Romanian Imaginaries*, vol. II. *Linguistic Heritage and Imaginary*], Iași, Polirom, 2020, p. 276: “oglină a imaginarului identitar”.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 276: “exhibă niște proiecții identitare, identificabile în perioade, spații și circumstanțe precise”.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 276: “fantasmelor colective”.

²⁵ Corina Croitoru, *Politica ironiei în poezia românească sub comunism* [*The Politics of Irony in the Romanian Poetry under the Communist Regime*], Cluj-Napoca, Casa Cărții de Știință, 2014, p. 22: “Esența ironiei etice stă în raportarea subiectului la viață și la concretul cotidian”.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 24: “are atât o latură logică, de transmitere a unui sens contrar celui exprimat, cât și o dimensiune axiologică, de evaluare a obiectului persiflat, care trădează o aspirație fără excepție idealistă [...] ca viziune asupra lumii”.

²⁷ Echoes from the landscape of literary criticism and cultural press (among whose representatives we mention Mircea Iorgulescu, Luminița Marcu, Sanda Cordoș, Constantin Acosmei, Daniel Cristea Enache, Ștefan Agopian, Cornel Nistorescu, Ciprian Corneanu, Pavel Mandys) are eloquently superlative and praise the robustness of their writing, as well as the authors’ talent to construct everyday situations imbued with propensities towards metaphysics and marked by an ironic reconstruction of a society that offers all the ingredients for such an endeavor.

whole slum “vertically compressed”²⁸ represent, through metonymic processing, the entire Romanian society of the first post-Decembrist decade, “all the typologies that populate post-Decembrist Romania [...] on the scale of a block that restores, in miniature fashion, the image of the whole country”²⁹.

“Having been considered the standard novel of the transition period”³⁰, *Simion liftnicul* [*Simion the Elevator Man*] satirises the problems of capitalism inevitably related to the communist and post-communist situation in Romania. The author places his characters directly under the magnifying glass of sociological and psychological explorations, thus strengthening the background for epic events. Such notations may be regarded as fascinating essayistic cores that manage to grasp, in a narrative spared superfluous words, the essence of his vision. The main character, a kind of *raisonneur*, analyses his neighbours in their juvenile specificity, which is that of spoiled children in a society freshly “re-treaded”, but stuffed in spirit. The author’s satire reveals the Romanian society on the verge of total surrender to a bizarre type of capitalism. Petru Cimpoeșu explores the ethics of an American-type of consumerism by framing it in a broader horizon of personal experience achieved not only under the communist and post-communist regimes, but also as a result of his readings and innate areas of sensitivity. Cimpoeșu’s anti-utopia exploits and enriches this “burlesque, carnival-type vision”³¹ by expanding the metonymic projection of the post-Decembrist transition period. On this account, the tenant-society equation endorses a space of values in crisis. *Simion liftnicul* “can be read, without much strain, as an anti-utopia emerging from the gloomy auspices of totalitarianism, which points out not to a totalitarian society, but to a consumerist one, revealing new ideologies still unnoticed as such”³².

Post-Decembrist anti-utopia unravels the discrepancy between the centre and marginality, especially in terms of cultural decay, false values, elites made up of corrupt politicians, crooked businessmen or old and current Security agents. The novel stores, in this respect, a sealed world, a universe functioning by means of reduplicating society’s codes and procedures, which are necessarily schematised and thickly caricatured. For the characters are not limited to doctrinal rituals, they show or conceal utopian worlds fragmented by ideology, in whose interstices censorship, the interference of the agents of power in the private space, the

²⁸ Aritina Micu, “Petru Cimpoeșu or the Compression of the Periphery in a Block of Flats”, in Iulian Boldea (ed.), *Discourse as a Form of Multiculturalism in Literature and Communication. Section: Literature*, Târgu Mureș, Arhipelag XXI, 2015, p. 1364.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 1364.

³⁰ Cristina Timar, “Cotidian și metafizică”, p. 455: “Socotit romanul etalon al perioadei de tranziție”.

³¹ Bogdan Crețu, *Utopia negativă*, p. 247: “viziunea bufă, carnavalescă”.

³² *Ibidem*, p. 247: “poate fi citit, fără prea mare încordare, ca o antiutopie ieșită de sub auspiciile sumbre ale totalitarismului, care își îndreaptă indexul nu către o societate totalitară, ci către una consumistă, dând în vileag ideologiile noi, încă nesensizate ca atare”.

shortage of food, the lack of hot water or heat during the winter season and the relativity of values are largely perpetuated. The poor capacity for mitigating the shock of the market economy, acutely felt by ordinary people, is responsible, to a large extent, for the characters' anxieties. The novel is overloaded, through projective schemas in the fictional universe, with such references to and speculations about political, economic, financial or cultural topics (for example, the BBC shows that Mr. Toma comments on, or the exit-poll conducted by Mr. Vasile about Horia Roman Patapievici³³), espionage, diversions, exploitation of the country's natural resources, electoral manoeuvres, the apocalypse, millennialism, astrological prophecies, occultism, the ambiguous status of secret organisations, and so forth, all weaving a dense canvas of anti-utopian mood.

The apartment block becomes an anti-utopian space, in which the pressure of the environment, the society, and the centres of power act altogether as alienating factors for the character-tenants, turning them into ideological vectors of some atavistic behaviours. Thus, a strong dissolution of the phenomenon of knowledge is involved. At the same time, values, facts, situations are reordered, so the accuracy of information, the veracity of facts, or even the "historical truth" no longer apply. The crisis of knowledge determines an optics of reality denial and, subsequently, the creation of a compensatory universe that implies a constant redefinition of the public domain through the lens of the private one and vice versa. The subjective, sensitive motivations of the characters require the introduction of the script in a random circuit: mendacity, the need for experiencing the ideal, an overwhelming desire for self-analysis are all subjective factors that outline a stereotypical and nude, caricatured profile of the characters.

Many conflicts of consciousness emerge in a world shaped by speed, craving for sensational events, and by pragmatism. All these factors have imprinted their *Zeitgeist* upon the characters' subconscious. The author discloses with finesse the characters' physical state (determined by the spiritual one), relying on their inner conflict as a catalyst for the reactions and obsessions that shape the novelistic universe. As a privileged space for the expansion of criminal circles, block optics work, in Cimpoeșu's novel, "beyond good and evil", projecting a natural background for individuals eager to conquer or recapture a time and place that would correspond to the aura of behavioural freedom. In the Romanian post-

³³ Horia Roman Patapievici is a Romanian essayist and editorialist, author of *Cerul văzut prin lentilă* [*The Sky Seen through the Lens*], *Zbor în bătaia săgeții* [*Flight within Arrow's Reach*], *Omul recent* [*The Recent Man*], among other books. He won several prizes for his contributions to the literary, cultural, and journalistic field. Among his political views we can mention his support for libertarian economic policies. Patapievici is a controversial figure on the political scene, as he was strongly criticized for supporting Traian Băsescu in the campaign for the presidential elections. He was a member of the National Council for the Study of the Securitate Archives (2002–2005) and the head of the Romanian Cultural Institute (2005–2012).

communist society, pragmatism and cynicism led to the configuration of an urban space in which criminality was more or less accepted, with a certain degree of effectiveness. Maintaining a criminal environment that could eventually be exploited illustrates unequivocally the degradation of society under the pervasive aegis of the authorities. In post-Decembrist Romania, even a form of pastoral manipulation emerged, giving a new meaning to redemption: health, welfare, security and protection against accidents – all these mundane goals acted as substitutes for the genuine traditional religious goals and explained the rapid expansion of criminal networks to the depths of society as well as into the citizens' private space. Without false nostalgia in this respect, Ioan Stoica's *Caritas*³⁴, as well as the hopes for enrichment by playing lotto games are evoked. Mr. Toma would be swindled by a young woman who sells him second-hand products by using a classic stratagem of recruitment and customer trick. From this angle, the novel displays, in an ironical, grotesque or absurd key, the entire corruption of our post-communist society.

Cimpoeșu's dialogues and characters bear the mark of a unique class of humour. Their solemn names (Nicostrat, Evlampia, Fevronia, Gudelia) contrast with the goofy concerns of their bearers. Some of them listen to the BBC and are concerned about how to enrich their vocabulary – "But it is a nice word, worth using, Mr. Toma went on. Listen to this: *cir-cum-spect*! It has something about it, I don't know what, like a whiff of medicine, doesn't it? A really noble word"³⁵ –, others deal with establishing the Party of the Undecided or the Popescu Party and come together to decide whether Patapievici is a genius or not. The epic pretext, namely the blocking of the elevator on the 8th floor by the shoemaker Simion, who lives on the ground floor, generates contradictory reactions among the characters. Mr. Gheorghe, who never uses it and prefers to walk, is glad that the neighbours have this opportunity and does not feel bothered by the broken elevator. Mr. Elefterie is far too preoccupied with the lottery and a potential gain (absolutely certain in his vision, because he played some dream numbers). Mrs. Pelaghia is

³⁴ *Caritas* was a Ponzi scheme active in Romania between April 1992 and August 1994. It attracted millions of depositors from all over the country, who invested more than a trillion old lei (between 1 and 5 billion dollars) before it finally went bankrupt on 14 August 1994, having a debt of 450 million dollars. The *Caritas* company was founded by Ioan Stoica, an accountant from Brașov who moved to Cluj-Napoca, with the support of the city manager of that time, Gheorghe Funar. There are rumours that many political figures took great financial advantage of this pyramidal scheme. Stoica was sentenced in 1995 by the Cluj Courthouse to seven years in prison for fraud, but he appealed and the sentence was reduced to two years. Then he went to the Supreme Court of Justice and the sentence was reduced to one year and a half. He has been free from June 14, 1996 and lived in poverty until 2019 when he presumably died. The majority of the of the depositors have not recovered the money they invested.

³⁵ Petru Cimpoeșu, *Simion liftnicul: roman cu îngeri și moldoveni* [*Simion the Elevator Man: A Novel with Angels and Moldavians*], Iași, Poliorm, 2007, p. 123: "Dar e un cuvânt frumos, merită să-l folosești, continuă domnul Toma. I-auzi: *cir-cum-spect*! Are... nu știi ce, așa, ca un miros de doctorie în el, nu? Un cuvânt cu adevărat nobil!".

absorbed by the idyll with “the gentleman whose name we pass under silence”, but also by her Christian reverence, which actually does not prevent her from cheating on her husband during the day and returning to prayer in the evening. Mr. Eftimie, a biology teacher, goes through difficult times when a student informs him that she is pregnant and that he is the blessed father. Temistocle, a thirteen-year-old student who lives with his adoptive grandmother, Elemosina, does not use the elevator so that he can save power. Moreover, Mr. Ilie, who is just trying to repair his motorcycle, resigns himself to the failure of the elevator, dismantles the motorcycle, carries all its parts in his apartment for repair and scares all the tenants as, while he tries to start the engine, his neighbours believe that they witness an earthquake.

In turn, other characters are calling for remedial action to be taken. The problem of the elevator gives rise to the same kind of ad-hoc gatherings secretly called “Iocan’s Glade” by Mrs. Pelaghia and her lover, a neighbour “whose name we pass under silence”. Simion sets up a kind of monastic cell in the elevator, where he prays and from where he secretly gives advice to his neighbours. In the end, he goes out into the world along with Temistocle, the latter being perhaps one of the best and most beautifully outlined characters. The small adventures of the tenants on the Sheep Street are intertwined with the parables of Simion. Fulfilling one of the essential characteristics of anti-utopia, “against this gray, monotonous background”, Simion is “a character that rebels, who stubbornly goes against the mainstream and struggles to recover normality”³⁶. We agree with the statement that Simion and Temistocle “represent goodness, the natural way, the standard of morality, they still preserve the last drops of vigor and vitality as opposed to an aberrant system that, in turn, puts lucidity and reason to sleep while changing the individual into a stultified being”³⁷.

In contrast with the ironic passages that depict the tenants’ habits, the tribulations set against an erotic-sentimental background restore, under the sign of banality, the restlessness of the human condition. Despite some elements of parody, the world of the novel has its own laws by which it operates and takes form, driven by impressive density and coherence. Subtitled “a novel with angels and Moldavians”, Petru Cimpoeșu’s novel imagines a gospel of the Romanian transition period, filled with well-defined characters, each of them illustrating a peculiar kind of mentality. The couple’s tensions exhibit genuine provincialism. The Tomas are arguing amid the inherent problems raised by the transition to a market economy. Mr. Elefterie and his wife end up robbing one of the Lotto

³⁶ Bogdan Crețu, *Utopia negativă*, p. 29: “pe acest fundal cenușiu, monoton [...] un personaj care se revoltă, care se încapățânează să meargă contra curentului și să recupereze normalitatea”.

³⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 29: “reprezintă binele, firescul, etalonul moralității, ei mai conservă ultimii stropi de vlagă, de vitalitate și se opun unui sistem aberant, care adoarme luciditatea, discernământul individului și-l transformă în muncur”.

agencies, as they are unable to understand that his dreamed-of luck had not hit the numbers he played. A verbal quarrel between the couple and the employee, carried on to the limit of the absurd and the grotesque, degenerates into physical violence, placing the characters into derisory situations.

Due to their anecdotally-inclined natures, Cimpoeșu's heroes make abusive use of language as a tool for creating illusory universes, personal utopias that ultimately degenerate into a collective anti-utopia. Among linguistic clichés and the chaotic use of words, they submit themselves to discursive snobbery. By using and compelling simple rumours or alleged information taken from the press, they create a kind of media folklore in response to the need for adapting to the way of the world. For instance, Mr. Toma, who listens to the BBC in order to mitigate the danger of manipulation, makes absolute judgments:

In fact, Mr. Toma divides people into two categories: those who listen to the BBC and those who do not. He has no respect whatsoever for those who take for granted only what is said on the "News". He considers them intellectually insignificant. All their opinions are wrong because of the manipulative information they are based on. [...] People's trust in all the lies that are shoved down their throats by the media is hard to shake because people simply refuse to change their way of thinking³⁸.

At the opposite end, Gheorghe Compotecras expresses himself in verse, generating a comic formal mannerism.

Other times, the contrast arises between what is said about a situation and the situation itself. For example, the lamentations of Mrs. Pelaghia who, although engaged in an adulterous relationship with "the gentleman whose name we pass under silence", prays every night to the Mother of God for her sins to be forgiven. Generally speaking, all the tenants in the block are "God-fearing" people, but the contrast between Christian prayers and daily life reveals an atmosphere of absurdity, nonsense, and duplicity. Duality is gradually developed, depending on the theme, the context, the situation, which correspond to the rhythm of the action. The writer emphasizes the falsehood of faith and its correlative masquerade. The novel as a whole leaves a bitter taste, given the authenticity of the narrative world and its ironic accuracy:

I am not too convinced that God needs all our flattery, our sporting religious performances. As if, after decades of atheism, we were so ambitious as to suddenly become some kind of world champions. [...] Romanians believe in a God that is a bit strange, who, although he primarily forbids lying, theft, cunning and other sins, seems

³⁸ Pentru Cimpoeșu, *Simion liftnicul*, pp. 12-13: "De altfel, domnul Toma îi împarte pe oameni în două categorii: cei care ascultă și cei care nu ascultă BBC. Pentru că cei care se iau numai după ce se spune la 'Actualități', dumnealui nu are nicio considerație. Îi socotește nesemnificativi din punct de vedere intelectual. Toate opiniile lor sunt greșite, deoarece se bazează pe informații manipulate. [...] Încrederea poporului în toate minciunile care i se bagă pe gât prin mass-media e greu de zdruncinat, fiindcă poporul refuză pur și simplu să-și schimbe mentalitatea".

to allow them with largesse on some particular occasions. A God who allows us to do evil while saving our peace of mind³⁹.

At the same time, Mr. Elefterie recounts the people's fake faith in the Caritas gambling phenomenon to which he fell victim:

God had decided to help people overcome the hardships of the transition period, and emergency measures had to be taken in order to do so. Not by giving them oil, as he had done with the Arabs – oil is made to order, wherever there's an Arab, if you dig under him, you will get oil. Not by inventions either, as with the Japanese. Not even by giving cars, as the Americans got. No: He had to give the Romanians cash. It would be much simpler that way. Money can buy you anything. For this purpose, God decided to send Ion Stoica down to earth. Unfortunately, Mr. Elefterie did not believe this miracle to begin with, although everyone was talking about it, and by the time he gained trust it would be too late. He himself would state, a few years later: "A Christian people, eh!... What sort of people, what sort of Christian? If this people were a Christian one, they would not run in a hurry to give money to Ion Stoica and his Caritas but mind their own business and take care of their problems"⁴⁰.

Genuine religious coordinates are extremely important in the novel, but they converge from different directions. In order to be able to circumscribe the nature and the eschatological functionality of Petru Cimpoeșu's passages that are charged with genuine religious significance, it is necessary to explore the slow transition from the duplicitous language and behaviour, which are undeniably attached to Romanian society, to individualizing the protagonist's expression, Simion, who finds himself in search of divine mysteries.

Simion's parables, which are genuine allegories, follow the main body of the novel sparking a kind of epic appendix. The parables of the old cobbler have the status of pseudo-pranks, as they are mounted in a mockery that summarises the entire communist system. The parable of the wire is iconic for the Romanian people's spirit, especially if we take into account its organizational culture.

³⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 142-143: "Nu sunt prea convins că Dumnezeu are nevoie de toate linguşelile noastre, de performanţele noastre sportivo-religioase. Ca şi cum, după decenii de ateism, ne-am ambiţiona să devenim dintr-odată un fel de campioni mondiali. [...] românii cred într-un Dumnezeu puţinţel ciudat, care, deşi interzice în principiu minciuna, furtul, vicleşugul şi celelalte păcate, în anumite cazuri particulare pare să le îngăduie cu o mare largheţe. Un Dumnezeu care ne permite să facem rău cu conştiinţa împăcată".

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 24: "Dumnezeu hotărâse să ajute poporul să depăşească greutăţile tranziţiei – şi trebuiau luate măsuri de urgenţă în acest sens. Nu să-i dea petrol, cum le-a dat arabilor – că parcă-i un făcut, unde e un arab, dacă sapi sub el, dai de petrol. Nici invenţii, ca japonezilor. Nici maşini, ca americanilor. Nu: românilor trebuia să le dea direct bani. Era mai simplu aşa. Cu banii poţi cumpăra orice. În acest scop, Dumnezeu a hotărât să-l trimită pe pământ pe Ion Stoica. Din păcate, domnul Elefterie n-a crezut de la început în această minune, deşi toată lumea vorbea despre ea, iar atunci când a crezut era prea târziu. Dumnezeu însuşi va spune peste câţiva ani: 'Hm, popor creştin!...Ce popor, ce creştin? Dacă era creştin poporul ăsta, nu alerga cu mic, cu mare să-i dea bani lui Ion Stoica, la Caritas, îşi vedea fiecare de treburile lui, de necazurile lui'".

Moreover, there is a polemical dimension that connects all the stories. The parable of apartment block living could serve as a motto for the whole urban literature that exploits this narrative motif. Eager to find a proper explanation to the purposes of life, Simion offers allegorical solutions for inner states that are only suggested. Like a new apostle, he proposes a direct focus on the deep levels of consciousness. The sacred is sought through keen exploration of the self. Therefore, aspiration towards God means acceptance and expansion of the inner conflict generally caused by the struggle between the sacred and the profane, as well as the desire to recover a dimension that should be governed by real moral values. In the explanations he gives to Temistocle, Simion argues that science, with all its rigour and complexity, could not access the layers of the soul, the latter being an illogical subject from the point of view of the purely rational way of looking at existence. Religious experience, on the other hand, offers the perfect structure for accessing the meanings and vast horizons of the soul, ultimately transcending the limits of logic and granting in turn true existential freedom. Temistocle the student, a teenager under the fever of early youth, is very perceptive to the erotic euphoria transpiring from the next apartment, between Miss Zenovia, his Romanian teacher, and Nicostrat, her yoga teacher, which haunts his subconscious and drives him to dwell into fantasy worlds nourished by readings and games. Forcing him to fall asleep, these worlds are meant to populate his dreams and extract him from the unpleasant context of the soul disease gradually taking hold of his consciousness. In the end, the character becomes Simion's assistant and the two leave the ship of fools, like a Don Quixote pair. However, novelistic anti-utopia is far from being transcended by this gesture of departure, as a real fracture in the coercive space of marginality cannot leave the characters without any traces or shadows of bitterness.

The thematic sphere of the urban space and the motif of life in the apartment block, iconic for our literature of transition, unite the characters into a collective imaginary destiny. The butaphorical agglomeration of people, things and stories that fill in the inhabitable environment grants it complete existential legitimation, a trace of the old mythical urban areas. It is worth noticing that this space can sometimes become a source of epiphanies, as if its corners hide transcendent mysteries (for instance, this is how the abyss of the elevator works, which tempts Temistocle from time to time). However, one of the novelistic axes envisions the relationship between center and marginality, which lets the author explore both individual and group identity: "Cimpoșu works with the banality of urban biographies constituted rather at the periphery"⁴¹. The identity gap between the individual/the collective and the axiological centre acts oppressively at individual

⁴¹ Sanda Cordoș, "Scara păcătoșilor" ["The Sinners' Ladder"], *Vatra*, 36, 2003, 11-12, p. 73: "Cimpoșu lucrează cu banalitatea unor biografii citadine mai degrabă de periferie (mahala)".

level, causing natural reactions of enclosure and rejection of the hard core of the system. The post-Decembrist Romanian city lives either by the power of money or by its citizens' relentless bustle, the latter being the product and effect of disorientation caused by the anxiety of synchronization with the European model. At the same time, the citizens suffer from a shock of adaptation to the challenges that the new millennium poses, as they are not able to understand the stakes of the competition systems that sometimes require some positive break with tradition. However, in a consumerist society progressively returning to the condition of global servitude by mimicking integration into a democratic system, the citizen will undoubtedly represent an absolutely marginal entity. In relation to a social environment where bread and circus represent the supreme finality, the average individual recognizes the stakes of integration into, or elimination from, both productivity standards and everyday pragmatism. As an alternative to reification, those that are left out internalize the important issues that define the centre, but often treat them in a derisory way, having no genuine awareness of their essence. Moreover, mockery, which shapes the Balkans as a matter of collective behaviour, is constantly colouring the daily greyness in sarcastic shades.

The relationship between centre and periphery undertakes substantial changes in the configuration of the novelistic levels. Almost all the time, marginality acts subversively, seeking to destabilize the higher structures. These undermining movements occur not only in the orbit of socio-historical determinations spotted in the background, but at the very action core of the novel. Marginal spaces take the prerogatives of justice, seeking to break the balance established before by means of social conventions. Marginality does not express only a place, but also an age, as far as its double polarization lies both in the intention to seize the centre and the situated derisory of ostracized, inertial, self-forgetful individuals. Hence the characters are those left behind, the unwanted, the ones disregarded by the rest of society. Their fate bears the seal of marginality and derision from the first moment of their epic evolution. They have no place anywhere at the centre of the system. Moreover, their complacency with a convenient life in the urban periphery is a magnifying glass for marginality and a sense of ineluctable apathy. Predetermined in the frames of daily reality, the block encloses autarchic flats, as marginality triumphs over the entire structure and expands into the tragedy of existence, summing up the relationship between the concrete box and the human mind as two spaces intersected by lockdown.

Floor, apartment, elevator, box, cell, all these labels imply a consecration by name or, more simply, by numbers. The marginal space is claimed and imposed not only by the world, as a form of defence against the precarious individuality, but also by individuality itself as defence against the suffocating world. The problem of inadequacy (social awkwardness) automatically changes the relationship between man and the world. The fracture between being and the environment, on the one hand, and society on the other, fully outlines the profile of

the misfit, of the hero who is unable to comply with an order imposed “by the centre”. Consequently, the prototype of the chosen one most often include attributes of the rebel against a world subservient to petty interests. It is the case of Simion, who goes beyond the conformism of a quiet life in order to turn his ideas into acts. At the same time, enrolling in marginal spatiality leads to an acute experience of space, mediating the confrontation with numerous anxieties in the inner space of consciousness. But such a physical limitation may be a revealing one, representing an incentive for the sleeping spirit, a motivation for it to break false limitations. The difference between the nature of physical, as opposed to the nature of mental, spatiality can be rediscovered in these borderline experiences.

The Romanian city in the transition period, with its gloomy landscapes and trading posts derived from provincial fairs, fully illustrates marginality. The blocks, ordered like matchboxes, stand for the pharaonic structures designed during the communist regime. Under these circumstances, life in the apartment block can be considered as the core engine for both objective and subjective marginality, submitted to derision and shaped by the background of post-industrial ruins. As a space of marginality, the block encloses the human interrelations under the sign of certain sociocultural conditionings, according to the antinomy centre/marginality. The mentality of the tenants, their system of ethical and religious values, their political affinities, their moral (or cynical, as the case may be) conduct are tributary to a provincial worldview, as the entire community closes itself in the tight circle of daily existence. Everyone knows something about the others in the block. Each tenant tries to impose a personal set of rules and values, but, at the same time, shows an indescribable contrast between appearance and essence. As a disorganized anthill that revolves with centripetal force around the preoccupation of tomorrow and the neighbourhood scandals, the block reflects the degree of the tenants’ provincialism, their cultural obtuseness, prejudices, fixed ideas, stereotypes and clichés of conduct and language. A sign that marginality tends to take over the centre can be found in the characters’ firm convictions, which they assert whether they are asked for their opinion or not, when debating with ardour the issues of the day. These issues comprise a wide spectrum of referees: economy, politics, Ion Iliescu, Emil Constantinescu, the expedients of everyday life, urgent cultural issues among which Kant, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Stéphane Lupasco, Nichita Stănescu, Patapievici or Cărtărescu are invoked. The effect of this polyphonic verbiage (often rendered by an ironic auctorial voice) is irresistibly comic.

In the midst of this general fuss, the out of service elevator symbolizes a crisis of consciousness. Simion the cobbler suffers a sensational metamorphosis: from the banal tenant of a studio on the ground floor, he will become a *sui generis* monk, blocking the elevator on the eighth floor and spending a few days there praying and issuing fables and tales. This fact alone generates a semantic contrast and correlated situational incongruity in the perspective open by the novelistic

universe. The contrast between the derisory nature of daily life in a post-communist workers' block and the metamorphosis of Simion, who becomes a spiritual guide for other tenants, takes the engine of the exhilarating novelistic creativity to an absurd mood. The novel does not lack intertextual references, which are sometimes more than explicit (it is worth mentioning the case of Mr. Elefterie, who recalls the hero of Caragiale's *Două loturi* [*Two Lottery Tickets*] and reflects the same bad luck, mental failure and violent madness). At the same time, the unexpected turns and the constant play between sordid, mundane small happenings, and people that mimic high spirituality works perfectly in order to generate irony out of contrast. Communist society, governed by a repressive system in which human values were inevitably forced to respond to arbitrary commands, is followed by capitalist society, which designates, in its essence, a tragic life reshaped in an ironic key. Classical human values no longer find their place in a world where the only recognized power is money and the only form of permissible pain is lack of it. Where the power of money brings laws and principles to their knees, truth will suffer alterations of substance, generating the chain collapse of humanistic systems.

At the opposite end, Simion illustrates, through attitude and behaviour, the wisdom of the elders, expressed in a self-devotion that, paradoxically, isolates him from the world. Simion does not feel marginality, and this is what allows him metaphysical salvation. This is also the reason why he owns the right to get out of the block for good. The character escapes from an enslaved community, eaten from the inside by a petty existence of which people are not even fully aware. His normality lies in giving up on himself, in eliminating any drop of selfishness. In his expiatory innocence, Simion stands at the antipode of the cobbler who played dictator in the darkness of pre-Decembrist history. The relationship between Simion and Temistocle the student also proves relevant for this course of events. Both characters search for marginal spaces, finding, in the end, the antidote to their perpetual waste. Both of them refuse to participate in the spectacle of a world full of ever-deeper compromises. They both choose to retreat into small spaces: one in the elevator, the other in his mind, in books and fantasies. As they acutely perceive the hostility of the world, the marginal space seems to protect them. This does not mean that the marginal space would actually be protective, or that it would be a good, positive, cozy environment. On the contrary, any blatant ideal vision projects life in the block under the pressure of searching for the metaphysical centre, in a journey of the self which brings out axiological landmarks essential for the human condition. Thus, marginal space becomes compensatory space. The characters exhibit an acute deficiency of authenticity, indulging in a sense of marginality. Beyond authenticity, marginality pervades the block as a form of fatality dominating human existence. At this level, another fracture takes place, namely that between the institutional-administrative role of the block, necessarily

connected to the factors of power, and the private space as refuge from everyday aggressions:

For a long time I thought about something else, I refocused on social issues. My organisation was no longer concerned with politics, but with education for the masses. There are many who spit, eat seeds, throw papers and butts on the street or on the bus, etc. These were the guys I had clashed with. We were forming teams of three or four agents to monitor the situation. If they encountered any case, for example, if a punk threw a paper at random, my men would pick it up from the floor and return it to him, speaking to him as politely as possible: "Sorry, something has fallen out of your hand, perhaps by mistake". If he refused to take the paper and dispose of it in the trash can, the men would apply a few cudgel hits to his back – to teach him a lesson!⁴².

In the end, nostalgia, the mood for solitude, the need for rich inner experience and the spark of introspection are among the subjective factors which lead us to consider the block as a space that reveals the spirit of the age as an ultimate imprint, since the transition period highlights the ideological pressures on the peripheral environments of society.

Concluding Remarks

A novel of transition, *Simion lifnicul* is born out of the absurdity of existence, out of events where heroes move from the sublime to the ridiculous unaware of the limits and of the transgressions they actually perform. The irony in the novel involves a wide spectrum of shades, from gentle, lenient irony to subtle oxymoronic contrast, reaching the edge of satire and sarcasm, but always keeping an exit door from the cruelty of total enclosure. Significantly, the author includes spicy or sordid details from the world of experience in the same frame of creativity, as a way of grasping the uncanny mood of human condition in its basic routine and idiosyncrasies.

Anti-utopian block life is seemingly the hardcore that wraps up the characters' destinies in a coherent imaginary universe. In this context, deconstructing discourse as well as undermining linguistic and, hence, existential clichés, are major coordinates of Cimpoeșu's writing technique, based on such strategies as irony of contrast, parallel mixtures, overlapped or interlaced sequences regarded

⁴² Petru Cimpoeșu, *Simion lifnicul*, pp. 239-240: "O bună bucată de timp m-am gândit la altceva, m-am reorientat spre problemele sociale. Organizația mea nu se mai ocupa de politică, ci de educarea maselor. Sunt o mulțime de nesimțiți care scuipă, mănâncă semințe, aruncă hârtii și mucuri pe stradă sau în autobuz etc. Cuăștia intrasem în conflict. Formam echipe de câte trei-patru agenți care monitorizau situația. Dacă întâlneau vreun caz, de exemplu un derbedeu arunca o hârtie la întâmplare, oamenii mei o culegeau de pe jos și i-o înapoiau, vorbindu-i cât mai politicoasă: 'Nu vă supărați, v-a căzut ceva din mână, poate din neatenție'. Dacă însă acela refuza să ia hârtia din mână și s-o pună la coș, îi ardeau câteva bastoane pe spinare – să-l învețe minte!'"

from different contexts and perspectives. Irony grants authenticity for the situational narrative in the midst of events and in the flow of thoughts.

As a way of self-ironic reshaping, the author expands an overflowing linguistic and cultural stereotypy, strongly highlighted by playful, intertextual strategies of parody. The novel can be interpreted as an inventory of vices that clearly reflect the events of our daily realities. Last but not least, the melancholic atmosphere, with discrete post-apocalyptic shades, leads a competent reader to spiritual elevation as a possible happy exit from the labyrinth of nonsense and absurdity, in his/her attempt to reach self-enlightenment.

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POST-COMMUNIST IRONY AND ANTI-UTOPIA: THE APARTMENT
BLOCK AS A SPACE OF MARGINALITY IN *SIMION LIFTNICUL* [*SIMION
THE ELEVATOR MAN*] BY PETRU CIMPOEȘU
(Abstract)

The purpose of our work is to analyse the motif of the apartment block as a space of marginality in the Romanian novel of transition. From an expressive, but also a thematic point of view, the novels of transition involve an interfering area of discursive registers (informative, descriptive, symbolic), creating layers of meaning and various levels of interpretation. We follow the meanings of this motif along a natural hermeneutical route, seeking to reveal its overall complexity, thematic density and specific coherence. At the same time, we briefly present the socio-economic and cultural situation during the communist and post-communist period, we investigate the novelesque technique and we integrate the post-communist anti-utopia in the series of formulas illustrating the novelesque expression of irony. We propose for analysis the novel *Simion liftnicul* [*Simion the Elevator Man*] by Petru Cimpoeșu, taking into account that it is representative of the Romanian mentality, cultural background, receptivity, individual and collective psychology, even political-economic factors, in a fictional space whose semantic core irradiates irony in gentle or vehement tones.

Keywords: irony, anti-utopia, Petru Cimpoeșu, post-communism, transition.

IRONIA POSTCOMUNISTĂ ȘI ANTIUTOPIA: APARTAMENTUL CA
SPAȚIU AL MARGINALITĂȚII
ÎN *SIMION LIFTNICUL* DE PETRU CIMPOEȘU
(Rezumat)

Scopul lucrării noastre este de a analiza motivul blocului ca spațiu al marginalității în romanul românesc de tranziție. Sub aspect expresiv, dar și tematic, romanele tranziției implică o zonă interferentă de registre discursive (informativ, descriptiv, simbolic), creând straturi de sens și nivele de interpretare diverse. Urmărim semnificațiile acestui motiv pe un traseu hermeneutic firesc, căutând să-i relevăm complexitatea de ansamblu, densitatea tematică și coerența specifică. Totodată, prezentăm succint situația socio-economică și culturală din perioada comunistă și postcomunistă, investigăm tehnica romanescă și încadrăm antiutopia postcomunistă în seria formulelor de exprimare romanescă a ironiei. Propunem spre analiză romanul *Simion liftnicul* de Petru Cîmpoeșu, considerând că acest text este reprezentativ pentru mentalitatea, fundalul cultural, receptivitatea, psihologia individuală și colectivă, chiar factorii politico-economici românești, într-un spațiu ficțional al cărui nucleu semantic iradiază ironia în nuanțe blânde sau vehemente.

Cuvinte-cheie: ironie, antiutopie, Petru Cîmpoeșu, postcomunism, tranziție.

CAMILLA COLLETT: THE WITTY IRONIC VOICE OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY'S POETIC REALISM IN NORWAY

Introduction

“Irony is a disciplinarian feared only by those who do not know it but cherished by those who do”¹. Among the first writers to cherish and master irony as a critical tool was Norwegian feminist writer Camilla Collett. Born one hundred years before women were granted the right to vote in Norway (in 1913, as the second country in Europe after Finland, in 1906), Camilla Collett is one of the most important Norwegian writers, best known for her (only) novel, *Amtmandens Døttre* [*The District Governor's Daughters*], published in 1854–1855, which confirms Collett's position in the canon of Norwegian poetic realism. Breaking the literary norms of the time in terms of both form and content, Collett wrote the very first novel published in Norway, and revealed the truth about the lives of women in the nineteenth century, writing from a woman's critical perspective. What is more, her literary production is much broader, consisting mainly of essays, but also letters, memoirs, diaries and short stories, and dominated by irony from the very beginning, which is used as a device to criticise the condition of the woman in a patriarchal society. Much has been written about her novel in Norway, but rather less about the rest of her work, and it is this lesser-known part, which represents a critique of society as a whole, that played a major role in the women's emancipation movement and first wave of feminism in Norway, influencing the feminist organizations and inspiring numerous internationally renowned Norwegian authors. I thus intend, in this article, to examine Camilla Collett's ironical overtones, highlighting her contributions to poetic realism, world literature and women's writings, considering the historical context of the nineteenth century in Norway.

Collett made a name for herself through her witty remarks, mostly emphasised in the second part of her authorship, notably through her essays, which have recently started to be explored from critical perspectives. Tone Selboe, professor of comparative literature at the University of Oslo, has published an illustrative analysis entitled “Camilla Collett: Engasjerende Essays” [“Camilla Collett: Engaging Essays”], aiming at popularising “the older Camilla Collett who focussed

¹ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony with Continual Reference to Socrates*. Edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1989, p. 326.

on essay writing. This is the Collett who doesn't yield to men and who's not afraid to sign her work with her own name"², which was unthinkable for the female writers of the nineteenth century. Furthermore, Selboe alerts the readers that "even though we know Collett as a champion for women's rights, few are aware that she wrote many other types of texts as well as this famous novel"³, confirming that part of Collett's work is not as well-known or impactful today as it was in her time. Nevertheless, apart from her essays, Collett carries irony in her nature, which is best depicted in her letters and diaries. Another Norwegian literary critic, Kristin Ørjasæter, stands out in this sense, with her several consistent analyses on Camilla Collett's authorship, starting with her doctoral thesis, *Selviakttakelsens poetikk. En litterær analyse av Camilla Wergelands dagbok fra 1830-årene* [*Self-observation Poetics. A Literary Analysis of Camilla Wergeland's Diaries from the 1830s*].

Camilla Collett is highly praised in her country. What is more, she has played a substantial role on the emancipation of women at a worldwide level, an aspect not promoted enough. Her most famous work, the feminist novel *Amtmandens Døttre*, a classic in Norwegian literature, finally crossed the Norwegian borders with Kirsten Seaverl's translation into English under the title *The District Governor's Daughters* published by Norvik Press in 1992, after almost 140 years, with a new edition published in 2017. Her authorship consists of 194 works in 636 publications and in 8 languages, out of which only the novel has officially transcended the national boundaries⁴.

The article proposes a threefold structure: while the first part introduces the reader to Camilla Collett and Norway's historical and literary framework, the second part theoretically integrates the concept of irony as it is to be understood here, mostly through Søren Kierkegaard's conceptualization, an author that Collett herself read and appreciated. The third section represents the core of the article, as it develops upon the first two parts, exploring the use and impact of irony in two selected essays in Camilla Collett's authorship: "Nogle Strikketøisbetragtninger" ["Some Reflections While Knitting"] (1842) and "Om Kvinden og Hendes Stilling" ["About Women and Their Status"] (1872). I have selected these essays because each of them stands out in Collett's work. While the first essay marks her literary debut, the second one reflects a change in Collett's style, which moves away from poetical realism towards a purer realist tone that is to be discussed in detail in the dedicated chapters.

² Ida I. Bergstrøm, "Camilla Collett: Older, Brighter and Funnier". Translated by Cathinka Hambro, *Kilden*, 2013, kjonnsforskning.no/en/2015/09/camilla-collett-older-brighter-and-funnier. Accessed on May 22, 2021.

³ *Ibidem*.

⁴ "Camilla Collett", *WorldCat Identities*, OCLC, 2021, www.worldcat.org/identities/lccn-n87882938/. Accessed on May 22, 2021.

My purpose in this article is therefore to explore the usage of irony in Camilla Collet's works before and after *Amtmandens Døttre*, interpreting the methods and reasoning of this critical tool and its echoing tones on the emancipation of women, by making use of available research on the author's work and through a close reading of selected essays. Considering the complexity of Collett's authorship in terms of variety of types of writings, I find the essay to be the most suitable for the scope of my paper, as it provides the author's argument and critical reflections built through the use of irony, which may serve as a political manifesto through its very definition, and exert a powerful influence not only on fiction, but also on political and social affairs. Moreover, by translating the selected quotations from the original Norwegian texts into English, thus making part of her lesser-known writings available in a world language, I will also highlight Camilla Collet's universal significance for both world literature and for the women's rights movement, hoping to contribute to the international acknowledgement of the author.

Camilla Collett – the First Norwegian Feminist and a Poetic Realist

Camilla Collett (1813–1895) is acknowledged as the first important woman writer in Norway, as well as the first Norwegian feminist, a pioneer in the fight for women's liberation in her country, and a quintessential voice for poetic realism. The historical context depicts Norway in transformation, on its way from poverty and agriculture to industry and welfare, from a developing country to a developed country, with the growing working class and bourgeoisie, modernity and democracy on the rise. However, these concepts are at their earliest stages of development, as gender inequality represents the foundation for many writings and controversies, the reality of the time being the absolute source of inspiration for Camilla Collett.

Literature is always influenced by the cultural and social context of the time, and in the second half of the nineteenth century, Norway's transformation is mirrored by the literary movement of poetic realism, which represents a transition from romanticism (1830–1850) to realism (1870–1890) between 1850 and 1870. The focus shifts from the individual, the self, the mystical, from nature, poetry and feelings, from an idealized reality to a new type of literature that would *put problems under debate*⁵, underlying the failures of society while describing reality as it should be as compared to the pure realist intention of describing reality as it is. The prized Norwegian literary historian Per Thomas Andersen has concluded that “the project of poetic realism was to write about situations in everyday life yet

⁵ “Å sette problemer under debatt” (“putting problems under debate”) is the slogan of Scandinavian realism, an echoing expression for Norwegian scholars inspired by Georg Brandes' lectures on the Modern Breakthrough in the 1870s.

measured against the high standards of the ideal”⁶, the result being some idealized depictions of accurate reality. Inspired by Young Germany (Jung Deutschland), the progressive group of German writers concerned with the relationship between art and society between 1830-1850, fighting for a democratic society built on equality and supporting women’s rights, the poetic realist literature becomes socially and politically engaged, setting the stage for the propaganda writing (Norwegian *tendenslitteratur*) of the Modern Breakthrough, which marks the beginnings of the realist era in Scandinavia, with debates on topics such as “prohibition, peace, morality between the sexes and women’s rights”⁷.

Camilla Collett was born to the Wergelands, an upper-class intellectual and affluent family, one year before the national Independence Day, at a time when Norwegian identity was just taking shape. While her father, Nicolai Wergeland, had fought for Norway’s independence from Denmark, and played a significant role in the writing and drawing of Norway’s Constitution on May 17, 1814, her famous brother, the romantic national poet Henrik Wergeland, continued his father’s patriotic legacy by contributing to the foundation of a national identity, not only through his political activity, but also through his poetry and entire authorship. The politically and socially engaged family played a major role in our authoress’s future interests. While they were involved in the liberation of Norway, Collett would become preoccupied with the independence of women, who should enjoy the same freedom and rights as men in the newly established country. Nicolai Wergeland struggled to provide his daughter with more access to education than it was usual for the girls at the time. She followed her brothers’ education when they were home-schooled by private tutors, and attended Miss Pharo’s School for Young Ladies (*Jomfru Pharos Pigeskole*) in Kristiania (today’s Oslo), and the Moravian Brethren School (*Brødremenighetens skole*) in Christiansfeld, Denmark, a school for both boys and girls established by a religious community with a philosophy that made an impression on young Camilla⁸, who grew up believing that men and women are equal under God, while accepting their differences⁹. Her upbringing was also marked by voyages through a more liberal Europe, especially Paris and Hamburg, but also Amsterdam, Stockholm and

⁶ Per T. Andersen, *Norsk litteraturhistorie* [Norwegian Literary History], second edition, Oslo, Universitetsforlaget, 2012, pp. 205-206.

⁷ Harold S. Naess, *A History of Norwegian Literature*, London, University of Nebraska Press, 1993, p. 359.

⁸ It may be interesting to note that one of Collett’s deepest desires was to change the marriage ritual so that the bride would not have to promise to obey the bridegroom, which remained unchanged to this day, proving Collett’s validity even in modern times. See Heidi E. Sandnes and Ingrid W. Kåss, “Ville frigjøre kvinners følelser” [“Wanted to Eliberate the Feelings of Women”], *KvinneHistorie.No*, 2013, kvinnehistorie.no/person/t-687. Accessed on May 22, 2021.

⁹ Donna Stockton, *Camilla Collett: Translating Women’s Silence in Nineteenth-Century Norway*, University of Colorado, 2011, pp. 17-19, <https://scholar.colorado.edu/downloads/41687h50f>. Accessed on May 22, 2021.

Copenhagen, which helped enrich her cultural and writing experiences. She enjoyed the salon life in Hamburg, improving her language and musical skills, and soon made a reputation as *the Nordic Sylph*, as Theodor Mundt, the German critic, novelist and member of the Young Germany writers' group, described her¹⁰.

By falling in love with her brother's political and literary rival, the poet Johan Welhaven, Camilla Wergeland experienced the "forbidden" love, a story often read as Norway's Romeo and Juliet. However, Welhaven considered her too much to handle, confirming in a letter to his friend, Bernhard Herre: "Alas, it would never work! Everything has Wings with her"¹¹, which may refer to her complex temperament, but also to her special, extra-ordinary nature. Thus, on July 14, 1841, Camilla Wergeland became Camilla Collett, choosing the mature trustworthy love by marrying Peter Jonas Collett, the lawyer, literary critic, professor and politician whom she had met two years earlier, who shared her intellectual interests and who supported and encouraged her to write. Sadly, he died ten years later, leaving the thirty-eight year old widow with five children and financial problems. It was then that she took her life in her own hands and decided to become a professional writer, a career path not meant for women at that time. She could have accepted her husband's family's financial support and embark on a domestic life as it would have been the proper choice for a woman, but instead she chose a life of independence, travelling through Europe to continue writing and fight for the emancipation of women. It was not an easy journey for a woman, since male writers were financially supported by the authorities, while women writers were hardly even recognized. It is therefore worth mentioning that she only managed to receive *half* of a writer's support from the Government at the age of sixty-three, in 1876¹².

Camilla Collett stands out as one of the first advocates for women's rights, even before the establishment of any feminist organization. As a matter of fact, she was a true inspiration for the feminist movement and for future associations for the cause, such as *Norwegian Association for Women's Rights* (*Norsk Kvinnesaksforening*). What is more, Collett distinguishes herself as a feminist (even though she never called herself one), not only through her early emancipated ideas, but also through a special approach to feminism, one with romantic overtones. One may thus call Camilla Collett a romantic feminist, since she

¹⁰ Josef Wiehr, "Camilla Collett", *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 24, 1925, 3, p. 338.

¹¹ Alf Collett, *Camilla Colletts livs historie: belyst ved hendes breve og dagbøger* [*The Story of Camilla Collett's Life: Enlightened by Her Letters and Diaries*], Kristiania, Gyldendal, 1911, p. 53: "Ak det vilde ikke gaa! Alt er Vinger hos hende". Unless otherwise stated, the quotations are translated into English by the author of this paper.

¹² Heidi M. Solbakken, Jorunn Ø. Nyhus, "Camilla Collett og Amtmannens Døtre" ["Camilla Collett and *The District Governor's Daughters*"], *Nasjonal Digital Læringsarena*, 2019, ndla.no/article-iframe/urn:resource:1:195297/17083?removeRelatedContent=true. Accessed on May 22, 2021.

focused on “the importance of the heart”, fighting for a woman’s personal life, not for political reforms, demanding equality and respect for the difference: “Feminists... do not call for the same upbringing as men; but they call for the same degree of education for their abilities as men enjoy for theirs”¹³. Camilla Collett was primarily concerned with changing the women’s mindset, as most of them were accepting their social condition and female compliance as the normal order of things.

Theoretical Underpinnings of the Concept of Irony

Irony has been conceptualized from ancient times with a variety of theories as a result, out of which I chose to refer to Søren Kierkegaard’s (1813–1855), the Danish philosopher who elaborated his views on irony in his doctoral thesis entitled *The Concept of Irony with Continual Reference to Socrates*, originally published in 1841. As suggested in the title, Kierkegaard builds his thesis on Socratic ideas, and just as Socrates’ ideas were still valid for Kierkegaard in the nineteenth century, Kierkegaard’s philosophical interpretation maintains its relevance today. Interestingly enough, Kierkegaard was born the same year as Collett, and their authorship was influenced by the same historical context, an aspect that supports my choice for this theoretical framework as detailed further.

A philosopher of subjectivity and individualism, Kierkegaard considered irony as the first step that a person takes towards subjectivity – a Socratic approach. The ancient Greek philosopher reveals a change in philosophy, building his ideas on subjectivity, the quest for personal truth and individual conscience as opposed to the philosophy of objectivity, breaking away from tradition and inaugurating Western ethics. Socrates proposed a new type of ethics, showing people that they can think for themselves without relying on traditions and laws believed to be sanctioned by the gods, by constantly questioning them and their own knowledge and by adopting a negative, ironic, subjective and free position¹⁴.

Kierkegaard argued that irony appears when the essence contradicts the phenomenon: “when I am speaking, the thought, the meaning, is the essence, and the word is the phenomenon”¹⁵. Consequently, if these two concepts do not match, irony is developed, which provides the ironist with a certain superiority coming from not being immediately understood. The Danish philosopher suggests that without ironists there wouldn’t be any progress, acknowledging the ironist’s power of leading change and opening the way to new possibilities, comparable to those available to a prophet:

¹³ Torill Steinfeld, “Story of the Gemale Heart”, in *The History of Nordic Women’s Literature*. Translated by Gaye Kynoch, 2011, nordicwomensliterature.net/2011/08/19/story-of-the-female-heart/. Accessed on May 22, 2021.

¹⁴ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, p. 163.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 247.

...the tragic hero... battles for the new and strives to destroy what for him is a vanishing actuality... For the ironic subject, the given actuality has lost its validity entirely; it has become for him an imperfect form that is a hindrance everywhere. But on the other hand, he does not possess the new. He knows only that the present does not match the idea. He is the one who must pass judgment. In one sense the ironist is certainly prophetic, because he is continually pointing to something impending, but what it is he does not know... The prophet, as was noted above, is lost to his generation, but essentially that is the case only because he is preoccupied with his visions. The ironist, however, has stepped out of line with his age, has turned around and faced it. That which is coming is hidden from him, lies behind his back, but the actuality he so antagonistically confronts is what he must destroy; upon this he focuses his burning gaze¹⁶.

Irony is hence an assertion of subjectivity, the ironist adopting an isolated position, free from traditions, undermining society as a whole and rejecting all previously established conditions in society, cunningly interjecting irony into language and using it as a strategic critical tool, but also generating a more subtle and sophisticated speech. The ironist stands out through individuality, not as part of the mainstream but rather as an outsider, searching for truth and for an authentic life that is true for oneself.

Up until the turn of the nineteenth century, irony had been classically regarded as a figure of speech within the field of rhetoric. The modern acceptance of irony as a critical instrument started during the romantic literary era with Friedrich Schlegel, who differentiated between the rhetorical use of irony in isolated passages as opposed to poetry and philosophy, where the author is ironic throughout, precisely in the same way as Socrates was in his dialogues¹⁷. Schlegel described irony as a “constant alternation of self-creation and self-destruction” with the purpose of unfolding the various expressions of highest knowledge, thus also diminishing the authorial omniscient quality¹⁸. At the opposite pole was Georg Friedrich Hegel, the German idealist philosopher whose aim was to reach “absolute knowledge”, and who felt thus threatened by the Schlegelian notion of irony. Hegel had constantly and publicly expressed his disapproval of Schlegel’s views of irony during his lectures, criticizing it as a “divine ingenuity for which everything and anything is nothing but an insignificant creation, unrelated to the free creator, who feels himself rid of his products once and for all because he can just as well create as annihilate them”¹⁹. It was one of the participants in the lectures who solved the Schlegel-Hegel dispute on irony, and this scholar was

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 260-261.

¹⁷ Ernst Behler, *Irony and the Discourse of Modernity*, Seattle and London, University of Washington Press, 2017, pp. 73-74.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 84.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 86.

Søren Kierkegaard. He motivated Hegel's rage with the Schlegelian acceptance of irony by noticing that Hegel's own position was actually so close to Schlegel's concept of irony, which blurred his entire conceptualization of the matter. What is more, the "Hegelian dialectic [...]" also appears to be animated by a constant yes and no, a permanent construction and suspension, an alternation of self-creation and self-destruction, an inherent 'negativity'"²⁰. In his book *Irony and the Discourse of Modernity*, Ernst Behler details the way Kierkegaard asserted his conclusion by referring to Hegel's statement on the universal irony of the world in relation with its quality of self-destruction for the purpose of self-creation:

Hegel draws a parallel between irony and dialectics by saying in one single parenthesis, *All dialectic respects everything that should be respected as if it were respected, lets the inner destruction generate on it – universal irony of the world.* [...] Kierkegaard tried to explain this irony using the world-historical individual, the tragic hero of world history. Such a hero has to bring about a new level of historical reality by displacing the old order, but is bound to an actuality that will equally become subject to change. Kierkegaard thought that Hegel had quite correctly described this "universal irony of the world": *Inasmuch as each particular historical actuality is but a moment in the actualization of the Idea, it bears within itself the seeds of its own destruction*²¹.

In order to ensure a precise identification of irony as applied in this article, I wish to distinguish it from other similar concepts, such as sarcasm or satire. Professor of Psychology Rod Martin defines and exemplifies the three concepts as follows:

1. Irony – the speaker expresses a statement in which the literal meaning is opposite to the intended meaning (e.g., saying *What a beautiful day!* when the weather is cold and stormy).
2. Satire – aggressive humor that pokes fun at social institutions or social policy.
3. Sarcasm – aggressive humor that targets an individual rather than an institution (e.g., At a fashionable dinner, a dignified lady rebuked Winston Churchill: *Sir, you are drunk. Yes, replied Churchill, and you are ugly. But tomorrow I shall be sober, and you shall still be ugly*)²².

Therefore, irony may be considered satirical when used as a tool for criticizing society. The *Dictionary of the History of Ideas* connects satire with irony by recognizing this satirical feature as one of the "aspects" of irony and characterising satirical irony, or "to blame by praise", which "reveals the defeat of an unsympathetic victim", from comic irony or "to praise by blame", which "reveals

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 88.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 90.

²² Rod A Martin, *The Psychology of Humor: An Integrative Approach*, Amsterdam, Elsevier Academic Press, 2007, p. 13.

the triumph of a sympathetic victim”. Moreover, Socrates is hereby confirmed as “the most influential model in the history of irony”, and “the dominant conception of irony [remains] *satiric blame through praise*”²³.

After having described the Kierkegaardian concept of irony as based on the Socratic approach and limiting its understanding to ensure more precise applicability, I will now proceed with a close reading of Collett’s text and her use of irony, which represents the core of this article.

Camilla Collett, the Ironist

“Just as philosophy begins with doubt, so too a life that may be called human begins with irony”²⁴. Camilla Collett was one of the first women who did not settle for being a housewife, nor for living a life led by men, despite the fact that she was born in a patriarchal society. The woman’s position, gender roles and social problems are recurrent themes in the author’s work, which aims at highlighting injustice to create change by unravelling a realistic critique of the bourgeois society of the time and thus “putting the problems under debate”, an emblem of Scandinavian realism.²⁵ And how better to achieve disturbing tradition and society norms in an elegant manner other than by starting from irony – that very first step towards subjectivity – and moving away from the collective towards the individual.

Collett masterfully uses irony as an instrument to accomplish her critical mission. The author’s ironic overtones are skilfully blended together with intense lyricism, creating a kind of agile, witty, but also figurative poetic language at a time when Norwegian authors were deeply searching for their writerly voice in a country with a re-forming mother tongue, evolving from Danish and old Norwegian. Her style is thus also representative for poetic realism, a transition from the romantic and the poetic to the realist stance. She tackles realist themes, triggering the alarm signal on what is wrong with society, but in a poetic, witty and passionate language. Her son, Alf Collett, revealed that his mother’s search for her style was intensely determined by her constant correspondence with her friend, Emilie Diriks. He describes her work as “condensed, yet clear and proper, witty, often ironic, vitalized by suitable images (like that of the brother), always fresh

²³ Norman D. Knox, “Irony”, in by Philip P. Wiener (ed.), *Dictionary of the History of Ideas: Studies of Selected Pivotal Ideas*, electronic edition, vol. II, New York, Charles Scribner’s Sons, 2003, pp. 626-634, xtf.lib.virginia.edu/xtf/view?docId=DicHist/uvaGenText/tei/DicHist2.xml;chunk.id=dv2-70;toc.depth=1;toc.id=dv2-70;brand=default;query=irony#1. Accessed on May 22, 2021.

²⁴ Søren Kierkegaard, “The Concept”, p. 6.

²⁵ Harold Naess, “A History”, p. 359.

and never tiring”²⁶. Collett’s style was also influenced by her travels to France and Germany, where she was inspired by contemporary foreign authors, especially by George Sand, whom she deeply admired. The author confesses in a letter from 1837 to Emilie Diriks that the most important feature in writing is naturalness:

...however, my letters lack a certain Naturalness – it’s like being ashamed of the simple, artless way of expression. [...] You see, one must only always write as if one were speaking, as if the Addressee were standing there listening; should one choose to look for Expression, that would be a bad sign²⁷.

However, the writer recognizes the shortcomings of her authorship, caused by her limited access to education as a young girl in the nineteenth century. It is thus striking that even though Camilla Collett did receive a more advanced education than most women in her time, this lack of equal rights to education and access to knowledge would torment her forever, so much so that she made it her life mission to raise her voice and change the world in this sense²⁸. For this, she needed to conjure for herself a powerful pen, sharpened through irony.

Collet started her official literary career in the 1840s by writing essays and articles for the political newspaper *Den Constitutionelle* [*The Constitutional*], the voice of Intelligensen [The Intelligence] party, the same political party that both Johan S. Welhaven and Peter J. Collet supported, which envisioned a new Norway founded on European culture, as opposed to *Morgenbladet* [*The Morning Paper*], the newspaper of Patriotene [The Patriots], the party led by Henrik Wergeland, who aimed for a revitalized Norway based on historical traditions. Ironically enough, this was only possible after the authoress got married, and with the support of her husband, Peter Jonas Collet, who was a literary critic for the newspaper, as well as a member of academic and literary circles in Kristiania. Her marriage thus provided the young writer with access to the intellectual elite and allowed her to participate in official debates and satirically criticize the woman’s position in society, if only behind her husband’s name, not her own, as this was still something unsuitable for a woman of the time.

“*Nogle Strikketøisbetragtninger*” [“*Some Reflections While Knitting*”] (1842)

The couple worked together on various texts published under her husband’s name, but her first published essay, “Nogle Strikketøisbetragtninger”, [“Some

²⁶ Alf Collett, *Camilla Collett*, p. 34: “sammentrængt, men dog klar og rammende, vittig, ofte ironisk, oplivet af træffende billeder (ligesom broderens), altid frisk og aldrig trætende”.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 35: “dog savne mine Breve en vis Naturlighed — det er ligesom man skam med sig for den simple, kunstløse Udtryksmaade. [...] Seer du, man maa kun altid skrive, som om man taledede, som om den Tiltalte stod og lyttede; vil man vælge og lede efter Udtryk, er det et slemt Tegn”.

²⁸ Josef Wiehr, “Camilla Collett”, p. 341.

Reflections While Knitting”]²⁹, was issued anonymously in March 1842 and it was all hers. She makes her official literary debut by writing about what was soon to become her critical mission and life cause, namely the oppressed condition of the woman in society as opposed to that of the man. What is more, the article is acknowledged as the beginning of feminism in the history of Norwegian literature.

The paper represents a critique not only of society as a whole with its established norms and traditions, but most specifically of men who choose to adopt this superior position over women by refusing to share knowledge gained through their privileged access to education, thus supporting the world division between the two sexes, and most importantly of women themselves for accepting their subordinate condition without even trying to aim for their full potential. The author therefore adopts the subjective Socratic position by questioning tradition and drawing attention to what is really natural in the world in a very subtle and poetic language filled with refined ironic interjections.

The title itself is an ironic illustration of what the discourse stands for, alluding to the fact that a woman’s thoughts were worthless at a time when only men were credited with intellectual capabilities. It goes without saying that knitting was considered a feminine, domestic activity, but the question that Donna Stockton aptly raises in her dissertation is whether it is a mindless or a mindful activity, demonstrating that the author meant it as thoughtful and reflective due to its calming, mind-focusing effects. By means of a reference to a scene in Henrik Ibsen’s famous play *Et Dukkehjem* [*A Doll’s House*], where Nora’s husband, Torvald Helmer, expresses his preference for embroidery, which is “So much prettier. [...] Whereas knitting on the other hand just can’t help being ugly”, Stockton concludes that “Collett chooses knitting as her central metaphor because knitting is quintessentially a woman’s work, but not especially pleasing to the male gaze. She is not writing her essay to please, but to provoke debate”³⁰. This represents indeed a very possible and suitable interpretation.

The essay is written from an anonymous knitting woman’s perspective in which we identify the author’s own voice, and it starts with her ironic reflections on the opposite, dominant sex: “It is strange that nowadays, when people write about everything and nothing, no one ever thinks of writing anything about our Gentlemen”³¹. The author goes on, intensifying the ironic overtones and the blame

²⁹ I used Donna Stockton’s translation for the title (Donna Stockton, *Camilla Collett*, p. 4), as I find it the most suitable adaptation into English. Stockton translated in her dissertation part of the essays that I have hereby analysed. However, for the purpose of text coherence and for asserting my own vision, I have added my own translation of all of Collett’s selected quotations, referring to the original in the footnotes.

³⁰ Donna Stockton, *Camilla Collett*, pp. 58-59.

³¹ Camilla Collett, *Samlede verker. Mindeudgave* [*Collected Works. Memorial Edition*], Vol. II, Kristiania, Kristiania Gyldendalske boghandel, Nordisk forlag, 1913, p. 296: “Det er underligt, at det nutildags, hvor der skrives om alt og ingenting, dog aldrig falder nogen ind at skrive noget om vore Herrer”.

through apparent praise, by referring to the *gentlemen* as “Our lords! Earth’s firstborn, Heaven’s favourites. The Lions here in our Northern Zone! There was a subject! Strange, I dare say, that no one writes about them?”³², and she provides an ironic answer as well: “No, certainly not strange... To trust them with the impartiality that goes with this trust would be almost too much to ask”³³. The writer hence uses irony as a strategic tool to criticize gender inequality and the way men treat women tactfully, by accusing them of not sharing their knowledge and of not reaching their full potential, even though, in contrast to women, they are enabled and have the means to do so. From a woman’s perspective, the author actually sees men as shallow beings, raw, immature and not at all as educated or as cultivated as they like to think of themselves, Norwegian men especially. The author is thence adopting a position which is subjective and isolated from tradition, making the individual the centre of attention and criticizing the impact of society and tradition on the individual.

The knitting woman then redirects her ironic gaze upon her own gender, the compliant women that accept their subordinate condition as if there were nothing they could do, as if they could not think and act for themselves, something that reinforces the initial statement that irony is the first step towards subjectivity, reverberating from Socratic times through Kierkegaard’s ideas:

What about the ladies? Yes, ladies have a lot of time and nothing to do at all... They all end their letters or thanks you notes... with the classic phrase: “For God’s sake, do not show this to anyone”. That’s exactly how mine end too. Now to think of these little wretched, day-shy thoughts published! Oh, even one single printed line must exert on the authoress a Medusa-like effect; she would be petrified over her own work even before others could stone her.

You may have heard about such an amphibian from which, although it is mute, certain pains are capable of squeezing out sound from it; but I have no idea of such a distress that could get the Norwegian ladies to speak, even though the distress is not just great; it is extremely great. The paralysis that strikes them through Norwegian upbringing and customs from the moment of their birth, will already prevent any such appearance...

You can therefore be safe, you our Rulers and Lords!... The ladies shall not interfere in your power. If one of them dares to express her mute thoughts, then these should not disturb you; they will only buzz your ears for a moment, like a swarm of flying mosquitoes³⁴.

³² *Ibidem*, pp. 296-297: “Vore Herrer! Jordens førstefødte, Himmels begunstigede. Løverne her i vor nordlige Sone! Det var et Tema! Underligt, siger jeg, at der ingen skriver om dem?”.

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 297: “Nei, visselig ikke underligt... At tiltro dem selv den Upartiskhed, der hører dertil, vilde næsten være for meget at vente”.

³⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 297: “Men Damerne? Ja, Damerne har god Tid og hører slet ikke til de handlende. ... De ender alle sine Breve eller Billetter om Tak for sidst eller Laan af et nyt Kravemønster med den klassiske Frase: ‘For Guds Skyld, vis ikke dette til nogen’. Akkurat saa ender ogsaa mine. Og nu at se

Women are thus also ironized for their choice of silence and submission, for the fact that they seem satisfied with their traditional upbringing, not daring to raise their voices, whether out of fear of failing, of being ridiculed or simply out of resignation and lack of individuality. The latter part of the extract is a pure example of the “blame through praise” definition of irony detailed in the previous part of this article. Camilla Collett praises men meaning the contrary of what she states, the essence (the thought) contradicting the phenomenon (the words), as per Kierkegaard’s conceptualization. She eventually explicitly criticizes men’s attitude towards women and their inability to reach their intellectual potential, thus remaining stuck in the grip of tradition³⁵.

Subsequently, Collett goes on to disapprove of the superficial traits that men praise in women, namely outer beauty. She makes an ironic observation on this matter in order to emphasise her meaning: “the balls are precisely the only setting where these poor ladies matter”³⁶. In another ironic remark, “The sword bearers, or as they should be called nowadays: the penknife bearers, look vexed surrounded by joy”³⁷. By depreciating their masculinity and replacing the sexually connotated *sword* with the small, insufficient *penknife*, the author may insinuate that the men of her time could not aspire to measure themselves either against their Viking grandfathers, or against more potent European men, who could better appreciate feminine values³⁸.

After ridiculing both men and women for their superficial collective attitudes and lack of individuality and showing her disapproval of gender inequality, the author extends her critique to outward, to the formation of the Norwegian nation. All these inconsistencies in human nature and order, which lead both men and

disse smaa undselige, dagsky Tanker offentliggjorte! O en eneste saadan trykt Linje maatte paa Forfatterinden øve noget som en Medusalignende Virkning; hun vilde forstenes over sit eget Verk, førend hun endnu kunde stenes af de andre. Man har vel hørt om et Slags Amfibier, af hvis Stumhed visse Smerter er istand til at udpresse Lyd; men jeg har ikke Begreb om en saadan Nød, der kunde bringe de norske Damer til at tale, og endnu er ikke Nøden saa stor; den er blot meget stor. Den Lamhed, hvormed norsk Opdragelse og Fordom fra Fødselen af slaar dem, vil allerede forebygge enhver saadan Fremtræden... I kan derfor være trygge, I vore Herskere og Herrer!... Damerne skal ikke gribe ind i eders Magt. Vover en af dem end her at udtale sine stumme Tanker, saa skal disse dog ikke forurolige eder; de skal kun surre eder et Øieblik om Ørene, lig en Sværm foribflyvende Myg”.

³⁵ The authoress’s critique of men for not fulfilling their duty of sharing their knowledge with women stems from a very personal experience, that is her own relationship with Johan Welhaven. She had expressed these arguments in their correspondence, already in 1835, and blamed the leader of The Intelligence party for not passing his learning over to the uneducated women – see Kristin Ørjasæter, *Camilla. Norges første feminist* [*Camilla. Norway’s First Feminist*], J.W. Oslo, Cappelens forlag, 2003, pp. 79-80.

³⁶ Camilla Collett, “Samlede”, p. 299: “Ballerne er netop den eneste Scene, hvor de arme Damer betyder noget”.

³⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 300: “Sverdsiden, eller som den nutildags heller burde hede: Penneknivsiden, ser fortrædelig ud midt under Glæden”.

³⁸ Donna Stockton, “Camilla”, pp. 77-78.

women to the impossibility of developing their full potential, have a significant impact on the entire nation, since a society made up by individuals cannot reach its full potential as a whole if it is made up of incomplete, weak, rudimentary bits and pieces. Camilla Collett is hereby proposing a solution, suggesting that only by means of knowledge sharing and education for all and by inviting women to participate in forming the country's national culture can the nation reach unity and integrity both in regard to its individuals and to itself. Kierkegaard's belief that subjectivity starts with irony is therefore extremely relevant here.

It is noteworthy that Camilla Collett reprinted the article under the simpler and more striking title "Strikketøisbetragtninger" ["Reflections While Knitting"] (removing the tentative "Some"), in the third volume of her essay collection entitled *Sidste Blade* [*Last Leaves*] in 1873, while for the first time signing a piece of her work with her own name at the age of sixty. She included an introductory note to the essay, mentioning that on reading it again she found it "so significant for the cause that has become my life's mission"³⁹. The cause in question is "the women's cause"⁴⁰, the fight for women's rights, she militates first of all for equal access to knowledge, education and public life, and essentially deplores men's sense of unjustified superiority over "the 'knitting' gender"⁴¹ – as the more mature ironist refers to women – a superiority that, three decades after the original publication, is depicted as "Evil itself, the great fundamental cause"⁴², a position that the individual man and patriarchal society deliberately take advantage of.

Furthermore, the motto of the essay collection is purely illustrative in this sense: "Suffer, tolerate, keep silent when it comes to something mere personal; suffer, do not tolerate, do not keep silent when it comes to the idea"⁴³. It shows a stronger and bolder Camilla Collett, one who advises others to speak up and join her in the fight for gender equality. Armed with an ironic pen, Camilla Collett has started in this essay, like the Kierkegaardian Prophet, to denounce the old and make way for the new, taking forward the women's cause.

"Om Kvinden og Hendes Stilling" ["About Women and Their Status"] (1872)

After the 1860s, Camilla Collett limits her work to essay collections exclusively, finding the essay to be the best literary form for expressing her polemical views on the women's cause, which she has finished defining for herself. This is also what emphasises my selection of the essay for my close

³⁹ Camilla Collett, "Samlede", p. 295: "saa betegnende for den Sag, som det er blevet mig en Livsopgave".

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 296: "Kvindesagen".

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, p. 296: "det strikkende Kjønn".

⁴² *Ibidem*, p. 296: "Ondet selv, den store Grundaarsag".

⁴³ *Ibidem*, p. 279: "Lide, taale, tie, naar det gjælder noget blot og bart personligt; lide, ikke taale, ikke tie, naar det gjælder Ideen".

reading exercise. Collett thus publishes her first collection of essays entitled *Sidste Blade* [*Last Leaves*] in 1868, continuing with two new volumes in 1872 and 1873. Besides breaking the already mentioned tradition of keeping the woman's name out of the public sphere by signing the latter volume with her own name, the fearless mature Collett breaches another patriarchal rule: women's publications were supposed to be endorsed by a respected male author in an introduction or foreword, something she deliberately disregards. By breaking both rules, Camilla Collett is now writing from a powerful position that only men of her age were supposed to take, but she chooses to adopt it for herself, thereby stressing once again her point that women's rights should be equal to those of men.

"Om Kvinden og Hendes Stilling" is recognized as the most important essay of the *Sidste Blade* anthology, published in the second volume in 1872 even though dated from 1868, and written in Paris, the city of the Revolution in Europe. The author continues her critical mission of obtaining equal rights for women, but in a more formal and persuasive manner, by speaking like a true activist and by renouncing the light fictional introductions while preserving the beautiful poetic expression. The essay thus marks a change in Camilla Collett's literary style. The ironic overtones are now even more subtle, while the sarcastic tone has been considerably tuned down in favour of a more official, appealing and eloquent argumentation.

The beginning of the essay continues on this very note, as the author explains how a writer needs to "convey the truths meant to be acknowledged in a sympathetic, that is in a pleasant, invigorating way, for unless this way manages to awaken a promising atmosphere through own or borrowed means, it will be perceived in its entirety as powerless"⁴⁴. Moreover, in order to stress this point, she makes an appeal to her favourite critical tool, irony: "Here, the crowd is exactly like the child who must be lured with lies and tricks to take her medicine"⁴⁵. She suggests that unpopular or taboo subjects (such as the emancipation of women), must be presented in a camouflaged, enjoyable manner in order to trigger a favourable mood in the readers. Sarcasm is therefore no longer a suitable instrument because of its aggressiveness, while irony remains the preferable device due to its perfect ability to convey a hidden meaning, while leading to change. She continues justifying this strategy by showing how unconventional works by Henrik Ibsen and Henrik Wergeland were initially disregarded in Norway while having enjoyed a very good reception in Denmark. Stating that she "could use several features from our *fatherland's recent history* to illustrate this"⁴⁶, she ironizes her

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 207: "bibringe de Sandheder, det vil have erkjendt, paa en sympatetisk, det vil sige paa en behagelig, oplivende Maade, formaar det ikke ved egne eller laante Midler at vække denne gunstige Stemning, vil det i sin Helhed spores som magtesløst".

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 207: "Mængden ligner heri akkurat Barnet, hvem man ved Løier og Kneb maa lokke til at tage Medicinen".

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 207: "Jeg kunde med flere Træk af *Fædrelandets nyere Historie* belyse dette".

country, referring to it through the masculine word *Fædreland* (fatherland), deliberately italicizing it to underline the shortcomings of her patriarchal, backward nation.

She intensifies her ironic remarks in the next paragraph, targeting the Norwegian readership for overlooking women's writings (understood as both writings by women writers, and as stories about women) that are not properly disguised in such a way as to please the eye, redirecting the irony towards the way they are interpreted:

A cause that carries a great message for humanity must therefore beautifully refrain from relying on its "silent power". It must have arms to seize with, wings to soothe, eyes and voices to flatter with; above all, it must be able to act on a mechanism that here in our heavy, foggy atmosphere is always in disarray: people's smile and laughter muscles. Poor, sad, boring, always inconvenient Women's cause, where can you get all this from?⁴⁷

The author continues her critique of the nation by comparing it with the other Scandinavian countries and bringing Sweden into focus. Collett argues that the Swedes are much more advanced in terms of the emancipation of women, but does not mention any names, nor exact details on their progress. While making several vague references, the author adopts an indirect tone, possibly to avoid triggering aggressive reactions, since her essay is a cry for support directed to Norwegians. She follows her persuasive flattering language strategy when referring to the Swedes as a "chivalrous people; they made instant concessions, grand and chivalrous"⁴⁸, to arouse competitive feelings in her compatriots, thus continuing her attempt, but without failing to slip in a few ironic, cryptic comments:

The Norwegian part of the Union could not simply remain quite untouched by these events in the Brotherland. They trailed slowly afterwards, almost like a bear on the tracks of a flock of frightened reindeer. This cause is just as promising as a noble cause in our Government whenever there is a strong and comfortable majority. However, the movement does not have a completely hopeless future ahead⁴⁹.

In the picture of the bear hunting the reindeer, the bear may symbolize the stronger sex, the man or patriarchal society, while the reindeer seems to represent

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 208: "En Sag, der bærer et stort Bud til Menneskene, maa derfor smukt lade være at stole paa sin 'stille Magt'. Den maa have Arme til at gribe med, Vinger til at kjøle, Øine og Toner til at smigre med; den maa fremfor alt kunne virke paa en Mekanisme, der her i vor tunge, taagede Atmosfære altid er i Ulave: Folks Smile- og Lattermuskler. Stakkels triste, kjedelige, altid ubeleilige Kvindesag, hvor skulde du tage alt dette fra?"

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 209: "et ridderligt Folk; de gjorde øieblikkelig Indrømmelser, og de indrømmede stort og ridderligt".

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 209: "Det unionelle Norge kunde ikke passende holde sig ganske urørt af disse Bevægelser i Broderlandet. De sakkede langsomt bagefter, omtrent som en Bjørn i Sporene af en Flok opskræmte Rensdyr. Denne Sag staar akkurat saa lovende som en nobel Sag i vort Storthing, naar Majoriteten er fuldtallig og befinder sig vel. Bevægelsen har alligevel ikke en fuldkommen trøstesløs Udsigt".

the suppressed part, the woman or her (missing) rights. The author suggests that in her country, the women's cause has been ravaged by tradition and disowned through the politics and rules of a worthless Government. However, she gracefully ends her argument with hope and trust in the young generations, prompting younger men to form their own identity, do away with the old conventions, and act for a new, improved life.

Thirty years after her feminist debut on the literary scene, women still did not respond to her repeated invitations to raise their voices. In what follows, frustration and anger rise to the surface in a more aggressive voice. Recalling the mighty power that women once possessed, a power acknowledged only as associated with evil, Collett invokes the atrociousness of the mother troll, who has "both the will and the ability to do evil"⁵⁰ as opposed to *Jutulen*, who is just a big troll that falls asleep when hit on the head; or the Biblical image of Eve, who was essential in the Snake's plan by first tempting the Man to achieve his evil purpose still called the Fall of *man* (although both Eve and Adam were part of it, and even though Eve is blamed for it). Collett argues that ever since men sensed the female power, they did everything to diminish it, to "demoralize and idiotize her... narrowed her existence, deprived it of light, freedom, power of action"⁵¹. She goes on urging men to make things right by liberating the woman. Collett hereby deepens her younger reflections on the importance of education from *Strikketøisbetragtninger* by concentrating, in a more mature manner, on the negative impact that traditional upbringing has on women, their being denied education resulting in their inability to know their true selves, thus ending up living a false life. Moreover, she responds to her critics who, according to the ironist writer, believe that emancipated women would turn into a caricature of the Man, by stating that women will still be women, but by their education and liberation, that is a liberation of abilities enabled through education, they will become more natural, true to themselves and therefore complete beings, thus also increasing their self-confidence and self-respect, features they lost in the subjection process.

The author describes this loss of self-respect as the most sorrowful consequence of the subjection of women, proceeding by illustrating the roles women play in the patriarchal society, ironizing them for working for the Man: "the Housekeeper for single Gentlemen"⁵², "Doormen's Wives"⁵³, "the Laundry Wife"⁵⁴ who must get a Man's Clothes ready ("Unfortunately, I could not keep my

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 213: "baade Viljen og Evnen til det onde".

⁵¹ *Ibidem*, p. 213: "demoralisere og idiotisere hende [...] indsnævrede hendes Tilværelse, berøvede den Lys, Frihed, Handlekraft".

⁵² *Ibidem*, p. 216: "Husholdersken for enlige Herrer".

⁵³ *Ibidem*, p. 216: "Portnerkoner".

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 216: "Vaskerkonen".

promise to prepare my clothes for the trip. Miss, as a couple of hours after I took the clothes from Miss, eight cufflink shirts came from the shop assistant”⁵⁵, “Mothers who have had at least three daughters brilliantly married”⁵⁶, “Wives”⁵⁷, “Old noble ladies who once played a certain role, but who soon found themselves replaced, in a position of ambition or sentiment, by a younger and more beautiful one”⁵⁸. All women’s roles are hereby ironically described based on their traditional positions ruled by men, the evident irony thus being present in the author’s words that contradict her meaning, since she describes the positions as they are and pretends to believe that this is just what ought to be done, as in Bergson’s conceptualization.

The author eventually redirects her critical gaze towards contemporary writings that encourage women’s subordination. She refers to *La Femme* by Adolphe Monod, a book written in Collett’s time but which the author ironically charges for its old-fashioned conventions, stating that “it could have easily, after many of its statements, been written in the darkest times of the Middle Ages”⁵⁹. She responds to Monod’s religiously enslaved portrayal of the Woman as created for the Man, just like the Man was created for God, a perspective based on the Original Sin according to which Eve is responsible for by having tempted Adam to sin, thus bringing down collective guilt upon all women, with two ingenious questions (that remain unanswered to this day): one – wasn’t Eve also tempted? And two – didn’t Mary redeem their sin through the holy Virgin’s birth of Jesus Christ? Camilla Collett makes her point in a more acute ironic tone:

This is beautiful and significant; one should expect Mr. Monod to find it satisfactory, and the guilt to be thereby lifted. No, nevertheless the Guilt for Eve’s Crime rests upon every single Woman, and every single Woman is obliged to atone for it in Relationship with her Man by being obedient and submissive to him⁶⁰.

She closes her argument on religion by referring directly to the Bible, wondering how women could have missed the “clearest, most indisputable

⁵⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 216: “Jeg kunde nok desværre ikke holde mit Løfte at skaffe Tøiet til Reisen, jeg. Frøken, for et Par Timer efterat jeg tog Frøkenas Tøi, kom der otte Manschetskjorter fra Ekspetitionssekretæren”.

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 216: “Mødre, der har faaet mindst tre Døtre brillant gifte”.

⁵⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 216: “Koner”.

⁵⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 216: “Gamle adelige Damer, der har spillet en viss Rolle, men engang har set sig fortrængt fra en Ambitions- eller Hjerterplads af en yngre og smukkere”.

⁵⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 217. “den kunde gjerne efter mange af sine Udtalelser skrive sig fra Middelalderens mørkeste Tider”.

⁶⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 217: “Dette er smukt og betydningsfuldt; man venter, at Hr. Monod skulde finde det tilfredsstillende, og at Skylden hermed var hævet. Nei, ikke destomindre hviler Skylden for Evas Forbrydelse paa hver enkelt Kvinde, og hver enkelt Kvinde er pligtig at udsone den i Forholdet til sin Mand ved at være ham lydige og underdanig”.

statement of the Bible ... [namely:] Fear God in your body and in your spirit”⁶¹. The author argues that this clearly demands equality between men and women, concluding that by staining the woman’s purity, the entire society collapses. Once again, her most passionate irony, conceived as a powerful call for action, is directed towards the self-submissive women, this time the “Bible-citing” ones:

And you Bible-arguing Ladies, you who are inspired by such a strange suicidal Drive to undermine your own Cause, arming yourself with the plump Weapon of the Letter, – against this Disparity, the Plague of Family Life, the true Source of our Degradation and Humiliation, our Desertion and even our Decay – against this Inequality, raise your voice, you Bible-savvy Ladies!⁶².

Collett was an early modern feminist fighting for equal rights for women while recognizing the natural differences between the two sexes. She ironizes men for twisting the natural universal difference between the two sexes, stating that since they were “not satisfied with the deviation... they have gradually created an artificial, unnatural difference, setting the ideal of the female character at the exact opposite end of that of man’s”⁶³, which would also contribute to the woman’s dependence on the man.

She continues her critique on contemporary literature by targeting works of fiction, all the well-known poems, plays and novels, where the woman is portrayed as the victim, as the suffering, poor, weak soul that must sacrifice herself for others, ending in wreck and ruin, most often in death. Irony occurs again as an inconsistency between the phenomenon (what she is writing) and the essence (what she means, what she really thinks). She criticises her fellow writers’ preference for the sacrificed dead woman motif in their books, which is also contradictory in terms of the phenomenon (the idealised sacrificing woman) and the essence (the woman as victim): “How could one count this unmanageably long Line of poetic Victims!”⁶⁴. The essence is that in reality there is no such thing as a poetic victim.

The author considers the status of the woman all over the world, comparing Norway with other European countries. She refers to the French Revolution and rhetorically inquires whether it would have ever been needed if the woman had

⁶¹ *Ibidem*, p. 219: “Bibelens klareste, uimodsigeligste Udsagn... Frygter Gud i eders Legeme og i eders Aand”.

⁶² *Ibidem*, p. 220: “Og I bibelargumenterende Damer, I, som besjæles af en saadan besynderlig selvmorderisk Drift til at underminere eders egen Grund, idet I væbner eder med Bogstavets plumpe Vaaben, – mod dette Misforhold, Familielivets Peststof, den sande Kilde til vor Nedværdigelse og vore Ydmygelser, til vor Forladthed og undertiden vor Fordærvelse, – mod dette Misforhold løfter eders Røst, I bibelsterke Damer!”.

⁶³ *Ibidem*, p. 221: “Ikke tilfreds med den Afvigelse... har man efterhaanden dannet en kunstig, en unaturlig Forskjellighed, der satte Idealet af den kvindelige Karakter i noget stik modsat Mandens”.

⁶⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 22: “Hvor kan man opregne denne uoverskuelig lange Række af poesitilslørede Ofre!”.

occupied the rank and place she deserved in the world order. She points out that the women's cause was not even part of the Revolution. It was all about freedom and class equality before even considering equality between the sexes. Then the author brings England into the frame in the ironic story of the Englishman who was so miserable as he couldn't get his wife to contradict him in any manner, no matter how hard he tried. The wife would have no opinion of her own, she would dress according to her husband's taste, she would have no preference for where and how to spend their evenings, everything she was and did was dictated by her husband. "Desperate, he proceeded to Divorce. But you see, she did not want that, and the delighted Man required nothing else than for the first time to enjoy the Bliss of being the compliant one"⁶⁵. She hereby ironizes once again the women's choice of remaining submissive and ignorant, and men's attitude towards them. Nonetheless, the author eventually throws a milder gaze on them while still pointing out the failures of their absent education in a beautiful, metaphorical, characteristic language: "The left Hand is constructed just as the right one, just not evenly trained. The so often emphasized spiritual Inferiority of the Woman, what if it is nothing but the clumsiness of the untrained Left?"⁶⁶.

The poetic tone is preserved to the end of the essay where the author makes another shrewd observation on the fact that there are no autobiographies written by women. She reckons that such writings would reveal a whole different world to the audience, namely the dark side of life, which would therefore disturb them deeply. But they need not worry, for such works would not come to light, since no woman would ever dare such a thing. The author continues ironizing her fellow countrywomen by comparing them with their more advanced contemporaries, the German and the French women, quoting Rahel Varnhagen on the fact that "us women always have to perform"⁶⁷, and George Sand that "the woman carries the weight of life"⁶⁸, and proposes a translation of these statements that would apply to Norwegian women: "A woman must possess the ability to remain silent"⁶⁹. As it is recognizable in her style by now, after reiterating once again her deepest frustration with her silent sisters and with her traditional compatriots, the heirs of women's voices, Camilla Collett ends her essay in a mixture of hope and disbelief, summoning both men and women to join her in the fight for women's liberation.

⁶⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 238: "Fortvilet skred han til Skilsmisse. Men se, det vilde hun ikke, og den henrykte Mand forlangte intet mere end for første Gang at nyde den Lyksalighed at være den eftergivende".

⁶⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 238: "Venstre Haand akkurat konstrueret som den høire, kun ikke øvet som den. Den saa ofte udhævede aandelige Underlegenhed hos Kvinden, hvad om den ikke er andet end den uøvede Venstres Keitethed?"

⁶⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 241: "Wir Frauen müssen immer leisten".

⁶⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 241: "La femme porte les poids de la vie".

⁶⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 241: "En Kvinde maa kunne tie".

Ending on a Praising Note

Camilla Collett is an emblematic figure for Norway and an inspiration not only for Scandinavian scholars and literary critics, but also for several other famous Norwegian writers, among which I will only mention one name that is resonant for literature enthusiasts all over the world: Henrik Ibsen. Collett's connection and friendship with the Ibsen couple (Henrik and Susanna) is illustrated in the letters they have exchanged, while Collett's influence is visible in Ibsen's plays where the protagonist is most often a woman in search of her real identity and purpose in life. Although Ibsen claims to be an advocate of the individual's cause in the search for one's true self, his powerful female characters played a significant role in advancing the women's cause that Collett had started. Moreover, even though the influential Danish critic Georg Brandes officially announces the beginning of the so-called Modern Breakthrough in Scandinavia as well as the advent of realism around 1870 by summoning writers to move in the realist direction by placing the problems under debate and exposing the failures of society in their writings, Camilla Collett has already begun this work and has even already been criticised for her feminine boldness and emancipated ideas, so ahead of her time.

Her authorship and life have been explored from various perspectives, whether literary, critical, political, social, or cultural, her impact on the evolution of feminism, women's writings and gender studies being recognized mostly in Norway and Scandinavia, but also in Europe, most notably in Germany and France, countries dear to her heart and important for her self-development. Nevertheless, the majority of the research is available in Norwegian only. Camilla Collett is still not acknowledged sufficiently at an international level, while she should be recognized as part of the world literature and the international canon of women's writing. What this article brings to light is how the Norwegian Camilla Collett managed to stand out in a patriarchal world, asserting her realistic ideas, speaking not only to her fellow female compatriots, but to all women and ultimately to everyone, making use of skilled irony while preserving the romantic tones of poetic realism and working for the women's cause with an echoing global impact.

Although criticized in her (especially younger) days, she was a true inspiration for many women's organizations that were to be established towards the end of her life. Camilla Collett was decorated in 1884 as the first honorary member of the Norwegian Association for Women's Rights (Norsk Kvinnesaksforening), and in 1893 as honorary member of the Association for the Animal Protection in Christiania (Foreningen til Dyrenes Beskyttelse i Christiania) and the Norwegian Women's Association for Animal Protection (Norsk Kvindeforening til Dyrenes Beskyttelse). Her son, Alf Collett, remembers her eightieth birthday celebration on January 23rd 1893 as a

memorable and beautiful festive day for her, with her fellow feminists parading in her honour, with all Kristiania's magazines praising her in articles in dedicated poems, letters, telegrams, and with an evening party of over five hundred guests (including Henrik Ibsen). He also mentions an adjacent ironic event: the Norwegian Government was supposed to grant her Norway's highest honour, that of Commander of the Order of St. Olaf, for her meritorious activity. However, on closer inspection of the requirements, it was found that the order could only be awarded to men. She passed away before the requirements were revised. Nevertheless, the recognition that she received from her sisters, which would carry on her mission, was the best reward she could have wished for⁷⁰.

Camilla Collett militated for the women's cause all her life. She became a fearless fighter, armed with a cunning weapon made of irony, humour, reason, logic, metaphors, aphorisms and poetry. She was a poetic warrior and a romantic feminist, with still valid, everlasting ideas. Her witty views on the women's cause could still save feminism and bring more balance to today's more complex topic of gender equality.

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CAMILLA COLLETT: THE WITTY IRONIC VOICE OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY'S POETIC REALISM IN NORWAY

(Abstract)

The article presents Camilla Collett as the first distinguished Norwegian feminist writer who used irony as a critical tool. Collett is recognized as an important figure in Norway, but she is not sufficiently acknowledged worldwide, while most of the research available on the author's work is in Norwegian. The article focuses on Collett's usage of irony, interpreting the author's methods, reasoning, and impact on the emancipation of women by employing available research, and through a close reading of two selected essays, "Strikketoisbetragninger" ["Reflections While Knitting"], marking the literary debut, and "Om Kvinden og Hendes Stilling" ["On the Status of Women"], highlighting a change in style, while also stressing Collett's significance for world literature and feminism..

Keywords: Camilla Collett, irony, Poetic Realism, Norwegian literature, women's writing.

CAMILLA COLLETT: VOCEA SPIRITUALĂ ȘI IRONICĂ A REALISMULUI
POETIC NORVEGIAN DIN SECOLUL AL XIX-LEA

(Rezumat)

Acest articol o prezintă pe Camilla Collett ca fiind prima scriitoare feministă norvegiană care a folosit ironia ca instrument critic. Collett este consacrată drept o figură canonizată pe plan național, însă nu este suficient de recunoscută la nivel mondial, în timp ce majoritatea cercetărilor disponibile despre opera sa sunt în limba norvegiană. Articolul se concentrează pe modul de utilizare a ironiei de către Collett, interpretând metodele, raționamentul și impactul autoarei asupra emancipării femeilor. Articolul face referire la studiile disponibile și propune o lectură atentă a două eseuri selectate, „Strikketøisbetragninger” („Reflecții la croșetat”), marcând debutul literar, și „Om Kvinden og Hendes Stilling” („Despre statutul femeii”), care subliniază o schimbare de stil și accentuează importanța Camillei Collett pentru literatura mondială și pentru feminism.

Cuvinte-cheie: Camilla Collett, ironie, realism poetic, literatură norvegiană, literatură feminină.

POUR UNE MORPHOLOGIE DE L'IRONIE POST-HUMAINE : LE CAS DE MICHEL HOUELLEBECQ

Plus de deux décennies après que Peter Sloterdijk ait proposé le concept de *post-humanisme* dans un colloque sur Heidegger¹, le terme contient toujours ses propres hésitations et apories sémantiques. Initialement problématisé surtout dans son acception philosophique, le post-humanisme connaîtra bientôt diverses objectivations esthétiques, qui ont, entre-temps, retenu de plus en plus l'attention des exégètes. Bien que difficile à circonscrire dans une définition – comme tout paradigme culturel vivant, encore en pleine gestation –, nous avons affaire à un courant de pensée pour lequel les spécialistes ont identifié une série de « noyaux » identitaires. Pour reprendre les mots de Jean-Michel Besnier, l'un des herméneutes les plus avisés du phénomène, le post-humanisme

évoque les fantasmagories d'un monde dans lequel les propriétés de l'humain seraient dépassées grâce aux moyens technoscientifiques dont nous disposerons de plus en plus : ainsi, dans le futur, on s' imagine qu'on n'aura plus besoin de naître puisqu'on aura les moyens de se fabriquer à volonté (grâce à la transgénèse ou à l'ectogénèse) ; on cessera d'être malade, de souffrir ou de vieillir (grâce à la nanomédecine et aux neurosciences) ; et on n'aura plus à mourir sans l'avoir désiré (grâce aux techniques de l'uploading qui préserveront le contenu de notre cerveau – et par suite de notre conscience – sur des matériaux inaltérables). Inutile de souligner combien ces perspectives s'accommodent peu avec le hasard et l'indétermination qui caractérisent et permettent la liberté. Le posthumanisme ainsi entendu décrit un horizon où les sciences et les techniques auront intégralement déterminé, c'est-à-dire achevé, l'aventure humaine².

Soucieux de la mutation ontologique qui a été enregistrée par ces dernières décennies, sous l'emprise de la technologie, le post-humanisme réinterroge le statut de l'homme dans le monde et les enjeux éthiques d'une telle métamorphose : s'éloignant de l'idéal cartésien selon lequel les hommes sont censés devenir « maîtres et possesseurs de la nature »³, l'individu du futur est le plus souvent imaginé comme l'actant d'un récit prospectif dans lequel il devient peu à peu *un autre*, un être avec une conformation hybride, façonnée par la biotechnologie et la

¹ La conférence de Peter Sloterdijk au Colloque d'Elmau en 1999 s'intitulait *Règles pour le parc humain* et théorisait l'échec du projet humaniste traditionnel à se réinventer et à renouer avec les impératifs techniques de la société contemporaine (Peter Sloterdijk, *Règles pour le parc humain : Une lettre en réponse à la Lettre sur l'humanisme de Heidegger*, Paris, Mille et Une Nuits, 2000).

² Jean-Michel Besnier, « Le posthumanisme ou la fatigue d'être libre », *La pensée de midi*, 2010, 30, p. 75.

³ René Descartes, *Œuvres*. Édition par Charles Adam et Paul Tannery, Paris, J. Vrin, 1957, p. 62.

nanotechnologie, jusqu'au point où l'intelligence artificielle prend possession de l'humanité, générant sa propre extinction. Dans ce nouvel univers peuplé de cyborgs asexués, d'androïdes et de clones, l'homme traditionnel reconfigure radicalement son identité, non seulement en termes biologiques, mais aussi – ou surtout – en termes philosophiques. Loin de l'idéal anthropocentrique de la Renaissance et de toute une modernité qui lui a succédé, « l'homme nouveau » est placé dans un scénario, déclaré plausible⁴, dans lequel il devient la victime de ses propres projets démiurgiques.

Or, en plus de constituer les prémisses d'une série de débats philosophiques pointus et systématiques du présent, de telles trames futurologiques ont trouvé leur expression, au cours des trois dernières décennies, dans l'imaginaire artistique et, en l'occurrence, littéraire. Le centre d'intérêt de ce tableau idéatique est l'espace culturel nord-américain, berceau du post-humanisme, dans lequel les préoccupations académiques sont, à l'heure actuelle, à l'avant-garde de la théorisation d'un tel courant de pensée. Ce n'est donc pas un hasard si les écrivains pionniers de la littérature post-humaniste appartiennent majoritairement à cette aire géographique⁵. Cependant, cet article vise à radiographier l'identité distincte que le courant en question revêt dans l'espace culturel français, en proposant une taxonomie de l'*ironie* dans le cadre particulier de l'épistémè post-humaine. Michel Houellebecq, l'auteur qui retiendra notre attention, est l'un des noms de la littérature française contemporaine qui objective de manière symptomatique, par ses positions programmatiques et éthiques, la spécificité du « post-humanisme hexagonal », dont nous tenterons d'esquisser brièvement le portrait en ce qui suit.

Pour un post-humanisme français. Le cas de Michel Houellebecq

Bien que l'émergence du post-humanisme ait eu lieu à une époque de mondialisation, où les modèles nord-américains sont devenus des standards socioculturels auxquels une grande partie des civilisations du monde se sont montrées perméables, le courant en question a souvent nuancé son identité selon les particularités des différentes cultures qui l'ont assimilé. L'exemple français ne fait pas exception. Comme le souligne justement Hervé-Pierre Lambert dans une

⁴ Jean-Michel Besnier, *Demain les posthumains, le futur a-t-il encore besoin de nous ?*, Paris, Fayard, 2010, p. 11.

⁵ Voir, par exemple, Ursula K. Heise, « The Posthuman Turn: Rewriting Species in Recent American Literature », in Caroline F. Levander, Robert S. Levine (eds.), *A Companion to American Literary Studies*, New Jersey, Wiley-Blackwell, 2011, pp. 454-468. Sanna Karkulehto, Aino-Kaisa Koistinen, Essi Varis (eds.), *Reconfiguring Human, Nonhuman and Posthuman in Literature and Culture*, New York and London, Routledge, 2020.

étude sur la question⁶, bien que le continent européen ait commencé à accepter, notamment par des leviers institutionnels, l'« inclusion » du post-humanisme,

de telles ouvertures, institutionnelles, universitaires, n'existent pas en France, même s'il est apparu dans les dernières années un nouvel intérêt intellectuel pour la science-fiction. En témoigne la publication d'un numéro de *Critique* appelé « Mutants » où le posthumain abordé sous l'angle américain était défini comme une « entité de mots, d'idéologies, d'imaginaires et de fictions qui concerne notre présent encore plus que notre avenir ».

L'imaginaire posthumain en France est essentiellement lié à la littérature et aux arts plastiques. Le domaine des arts plastiques comprend à cette date les travaux d'art tissulaire d'Art Orienté Objet, les études du zoo-systémicien Louis Bec, les biofictions d'Anne Esperet, les performances d'Orlan. L'exposition *L'art biotech* à Nantes en 2003 sous la direction de Jens Hauser et les polémiques associées à la lapine transgénique française d'Édouard Kac, le fameux *lapin vert*, ont donné une large audience à cette mouvance. Parmi les écrivains relevant de cet imaginaire, nous citerons Jean-Michel Truong, Maurice G. Dantec, Michel Houellebecq, Pierre Bordage, Serge Lehman. Certains viennent de la littérature de science-fiction, Bordage, Lehman⁷.

Même si, au cours de la dernière décennie, il y a eu des ouvertures universitaires vers l'étude du posthumanisme, le diagnostic établi par le critique français reste valable. La réticence des spécialistes francophones face à la nouvelle « philosophie » américaine est en vogue⁸. Dominique Lecourt postule, dans le volume *Humain, post-humain*⁹, une dichotomie qui singularise le post-humanisme européen (et, en l'occurrence, français) par rapport à la version nord-américaine du courant : si le premier est techno-progressiste et investit la nouvelle épistémè d'une connotation optimiste, la version européenne – bio-conservatrice – se traduit plutôt par une vision catastrophique, obsédée par les risques de la dégradation humaine et des dangers écologiques.

Michel Houellebecq réactualise, dans son propre imaginaire romanesque, fortement engagé dans une satire sur les déviances du présent, la charge eschatologique qui définit le post-humanisme dans sa formule européenne. L'écrivain français n'a pas échappé aux accusations de réactionnarisme. Houellebecq (depuis son premier roman, paru en 1994, *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, à *Sérotonine*, paru en 2019) manifeste une hostilité sans faille à la régression de l'esprit européen, reconnaissable dans la manière apocalyptique dont il architecture la société de l'avenir. Les significations éthiques de sa propre

⁶ Hervé-Pierre Lambert, « La version française de l'imaginaire posthumain », *Stella. Revue de langue et littérature française*, 2009, 28, pp. 19-38.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 22.

⁸ Voir, par exemple, Mark Hunyadi, *Le Temps du posthumanisme. Un diagnostic d'époque*, Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 2018.

⁹ Dominique Lecourt, *Humain, post-humain*, Paris, PUF, 2003.

écriture sont mises en scène à l'aide d'un instrumentaire ironique que nous analyserons dans les lignes suivantes, en accordant une attention particulière aux différentes finalités poursuivies dans la construction de l'éthos romanesque par un tel mécanisme discursif.

L'ironie – les apories d'un concept

L'ironie appartient à la catégorie des concepts indéfinissables. Vladimir Jankélévitch tente une généalogie du terme et un inventaire des différentes positions prises par les théoriciens du problème à propos des significations de l'ironie¹⁰. Le fait est qu'en vertu de son usage millénaire et des diverses époques auxquelles elle a reçu diverses connotations, colorées idéologiquement et programmatiquement, nous sommes confrontés à une grande fluidité dans la définition de cette notion, au point qu'un Philippe Hamon l'envisage, par exemple, comme un « piège terminologique »¹¹.

Les origines de l'ironie remontent à l'Antiquité grecque, aux significations que le concept reçoit de Socrate et qui fixent déjà sa double condition : *rhétorique*, au sens d'une ironie instrumentalisée dans le discours, et *philosophique*, car l'ironie peut aussi être comprise comme « une manière de vivre et de penser ». Les romantiques allemands, tel un Schlegel, ont réhabilité, à la fin du XVIII^e siècle, l'ironie dans ce second sens, de « posture éthique et intellectuelle ». Ils ont rouvert une tradition de la notion que perpétueront, entre autres, bien des philosophes comme Hegel, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche ou Bergson. Dans cet article, nous porterons une attention particulière non pas tant à l'ironie en tant que *trope*, mais à une ironie perçue comme *une vision du monde*¹². C'est une vision qui s'appuie sur un regard satirique orienté vers la réalité, dénonçant les convenances socio-morales les plus profondément ancrées dans l'esprit collectif de la contemporanéité. Ce n'est pas un hasard si N. Frye prend en considération la conjonction structurelle entre l'ironie et la satire, définissant cette dernière comme « une ironie militante »¹³. Ainsi, dans la littérature de Houellebecq¹⁴, le concept est valorisé dans le sens d'une posture satirique, visant les désordres de l'humanité et investie d'enjeux programmatiques et axiologiques que nous questionnerons dans notre tentative d'établir une taxonomie de l'ironie post-humaine.

¹⁰ Vladimir Jankélévitch, *L'Ironie*, Paris, Flammarion, 1964, pp. 41-42.

¹¹ Philippe Hamon, *L'ironie littéraire : essai sur les formes de l'écriture oblique*, Paris, Hachette, 1996, p. 44.

¹² G. Palante, « L'ironie, étude psychologique », *Revue philosophique de la France et de l'étranger*, 1996, 61, p. 153.

¹³ Northrop Frye, *Anatomie de la critique*. Traduit par Guy Durand, Paris, Gallimard, 1969, p. 272.

¹⁴ Bruno Blanckeman, « L'ironie dans l'œuvre romanesque de Michel Houellebecq », in Alexandre Didier, Pierre Schoentjes (éds.), *L'ironie : formes et enjeux d'une écriture contemporaine*, Paris, Classiques Garnier, 2013, pp. 46-64.

Sous les auspices de l'ironie programmatique

L'ironie, dans le cas de Michel Houellebecq, indique une vision spécifique de l'auteur sur la littérature et sur la condition que l'écrivain contemporain assume par rapport à la tradition littéraire. Comme le souligne justement Guillaume Bridet, nous avons affaire à un nom qui n'est plus esthétiquement légitimé par les instances classiques censées créer le canon littéraire, mais plutôt par toute une stratégie par laquelle les médias ont généré le mythe houellebecqien :

La Possibilité d'une île confirme ce qu'avaient déjà montré les romans précédents : ce n'est pas l'Université française qui couronne l'œuvre romanesque de Michel Houellebecq – comme elle couronne déjà celle d'autres écrivains nés eux aussi après la Seconde Guerre mondiale, comme Pierre Michon, Jean Echenoz ou François Bon –, ce sont essentiellement les médias à destination du grand public. L'œuvre n'invente ni un genre, ni un type de narration, et son style se caractérise par un réalisme souvent cru. Ce sont sans aucun doute ce manque d'invention formelle et cette trivialité qui la discréditent aux yeux des lecteurs dont les jugements sont essentiellement fondés sur une exigence proprement littéraire et esthétique. Mais l'œuvre n'appartient pas pour autant à la catégorie des romans formatés qu'on désigne sous l'appellation globale de *bestseller* et qui sont destinés à une pratique de lecture relevant du loisir de masse¹⁵.

Tout ce « jeu » de la littérature de Houellebecq avec les mécanismes de légitimation culturelle cache finalement des implications programmatiques beaucoup plus larges. C'est une sorte d'ambiguïté volontaire, fréquemment cultivée par l'écrivain français, qui appartient aux ressorts les plus intimes de l'ironie¹⁶. Or, une telle ambiguïté définit non seulement les relations de la figure auctoriale avec toute une tradition de la consécration littéraire, mais aussi, par exemple, l'éclectisme artistique propre à Houellebecq. La versatilité intrinsèque du post-humanisme, en tant que vision totalisante du monde, qui transgresse le « mythe de la spécialisation » fondé au XIX^e siècle (mythe auquel, d'ailleurs, le XX^e siècle avait déjà montré quelques réticences), est également visible dans la sphère d'intérêts de Houellebecq : poète, romancier, critique littéraire, chanteur, scénariste, photographe, cinéaste, nous avons affaire à un créateur qui exerce dans un large éventail de paradigmes esthétiques. C'est une « posture littéraire » – reprenant le titre d'un ouvrage de référence de Jérôme Meizoz – éminemment ironique par rapport à une enclave littéraire que les auteurs post-humanistes jugent révolue¹⁷. L'imaginaire romanesque houellebecqien lui-même défie l'élitisme de

¹⁵ Guillaume Bridet, « Michel Houellebecq et les montres molles », *Littérature*, 2008, 151, p. 6.

¹⁶ Le chevauchement sémantique entre *ironie* et *ambiguïté* a été intensément véhiculé par les mouvements théoriques du XX^e siècle, du structuralisme à la déconstruction et au pragmatisme.

¹⁷ V. Jérôme Meizoz, *Postures littéraires. Mises en scène modernes de l'auteur*, Genève, Slatkine, 2007.

l'ancienne littérature : à l'exception de *La Possibilité d'une île*, les récits de Houellebecq reconstituent tous une réalité banale, des classes moyennes, peuplée d'actants typologiquement proches du programme philosophique post-humain (chercheurs scientifiques, informaticiens), « des individus sans relief particulier participant de cette industrie immatérielle du savoir et des services caractérisant en propre le monde du travail de notre époque »¹⁸. Cependant, l'ironie de Houellebecq ne s'empare pas seulement des leviers de validation propres à un système culturel jugé obsolète, mais aussi de la littérature elle-même, ridiculisant son pouvoir émancipateur. L'écrivain français s'interroge sur la capacité de l'art à orienter l'individu vers des formes de liberté, lui préférant de loin les sciences fortes. Ce n'est pas un hasard si Daniel25, personnage de *La Possibilité d'une île*, affirme avec conviction que « ce que l'humanité [a] de meilleur », c'est « son ingéniosité technologique » ; les « productions littéraires et artistiques » et les « systèmes philosophiques ou théologiques » restent des « divagations arbitraires d'esprits limités, confus »¹⁹. Or, ce scientisme radical fait sans doute partie d'un vaste programme du post-humanisme, censé ironiser les humanités et l'intellectualisme. Et quel meilleur exemple d'objectivation de cette ironie que les séquences dans lesquelles le narrateur du même roman s'autosancionne sarcastiquement, se qualifiant de « balzacien *medium light* » et d'« *observateur acerbe des faits de société* » ?²⁰

Les spectres de l'ironie axiologique

L'ironie a aussi un tournant éthique décisif dans la littérature houellebecquienne²¹. Elle vise en premier lieu les *idéologies* de la contemporanéité et leurs diverses formes de radicalisation. Cette *ironie idéologique* sanctionne, par exemple, les réductionnismes du matérialisme scientifique, à partir du problème de l'existence de la conscience : *Les particules élémentaires* propose, par la voix de Michel, une telle réflexion destinée à ridiculiser les carences explicatives d'une conception philosophique fondée sur la primordialité de la matière :

La conscience individuelle apparaissait brusquement, sans raison apparente, au milieu des lignées animales ; elle précédait sans aucun doute très largement le langage [...] Une conscience de soi, absente chez les nématodes, avait pu être mise en évidence chez des lézards peu spécialisés tels que *Lacerta agilis* ; elle impliquait très probablement la présence d'un système nerveux central, et quelque chose de plus. Ce

¹⁸ Guillaume Bridet, « Michel Houellebecq et les montres molles », p. 10.

¹⁹ Michel Houellebecq, *La Possibilité d'une île*, Paris, Fayard, 2005, pp. 455-456.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 151.

²¹ Clément Lemaitre, « Mutations de l'ironie dans l'œuvre de Michel Houellebecq », *Carnets. Revue électronique d'études françaises de l'APEF*, 2022, 23, <http://journals.openedition.org/carnets/13730>. Consulté le 31 mai 2022.

quelque chose restait absolument mystérieux ; l'apparition de la conscience ne semblait pouvoir être reliée à aucune donnée anatomique, biochimique ou cellulaire ; c'était décourageant²².

La remarque est suggestive pour un écrivain souvent accusé de sympathies « réactionnaires »²³. Afin de créer un nouveau monde « post-humain », Houellebecq a fréquemment recours, dans son œuvre, à la dénonciation des totalitarismes du XX^e siècle, du communisme au fascisme, colorant son ironie du lexique propre au discours idéologique en question, comme nous avons pu le voir dans l'exemple ci-dessus. D'ailleurs, l'écrivain français n'a pas échappé aux critiques quant à la présence, dans ses romans, de certains clichés idéologiques de la droite radicale : antiracisme, critique du féminisme, antiaméricanisme, etc. Bien que certains exégètes aient tenté de démontrer les partis pris de la fiction houellebecquienne, qui accrédirait de tels lieux communs, en tentant d'identifier la proximité entre l'auteur biographique et les protagonistes des romans²⁴, Guillaume Bridet note à juste titre qu'une lecture tellement univoque et déterministe de ses romans nécessite de multiples nuances, et le fait que sa littérature soit favorablement accueillie par des lecteurs aux opinions politiques très différentes (comme ce fut le cas de Dominique Noguez) indique une ambiguïté structurelle que les récits en question – en tant qu'univers autonomes – cultivent par rapport aux idéologies, étant en rapport avec un jeu de l'ironie avec toute vision du monde standardisée et inflexible.

L'ironie est, dans d'autres cas, *sociétale*, sanctionnant les structures civilisationnelles du monde contemporain. Les romans thématisent les formes d'angoisse sociale de la France et, plus largement, du monde occidental, déplorant une nation au bord du vieillissement, minée par un mal-être socio-économique généralisé. Mais l'intention ironique du narrateur est aussi dirigée vers le monde nouveau, post-humain, qu'il met en scène, peuplé de clones et capable de transgresser la mort, comme cela arrive par exemple dans *La Possibilité d'une île*. Le « nouveau monde » n'intègre pas utopiquement une société parfaite, mais est menacé par les mêmes fissures du manque d'amour et de la dégradation humaine. Ce n'est donc pas un hasard si Daniel prend douloureusement conscience de ses limites (post)humaines et décide de renoncer à l'immortalité. L'exemple que nous avons choisi – parmi tant d'autres – marque une attitude ironique envers l'idée de *société mythique* : aucune structure collective, présente ou future, ne peut échapper à ses dysfonctionnements et ne doit pas donner de faux espoirs. Hervé-Pierre Lambert pousse l'hypothèse un peu plus loin : « L'une des caractéristiques du

²² Michel Houellebecq, *Les Particules élémentaires*, Paris, Flammarion, 1998, pp. 224-225.

²³ Daniel Lindenberg, *Le Rappel à l'ordre. Enquête sur les nouveaux réactionnaires*, Paris, Seuil, 2002.

²⁴ Denis Demonpion, *Houellebecq non autorisé : enquête sur un phénomène*, Paris, Libella Maren Sell, 2005.

posthumain à la française réside dans sa vision catastrophique des “mondes possibles” »²⁵.

Les stratégies les plus complexes caractérisent cependant *l'ironie ontologique*, dans une littérature post-humaine qui invente des existences alternatives en réponse à une réalité eschatologique. L'avenir « plausible » qu'inaugurent les post-humanistes – en clé imaginaire – est défini par les techno-mythes et opère une véritable révolution anthropologique. Une telle révolution reçoit, en fait, chez Houellebecq, des connotations péjoratives, étant l'équivalent d'une apocalypse des relations interindividuelles et d'une absolutisation du narcissisme social. *Les Particules élémentaires* mettent ironiquement en scène les mutations du réel : après avoir annoncé l'émergence d'une nouvelle réalité et d'une nouvelle espèce, libérées de la souffrance et de la mort, le narrateur ne fournit pas de détails sur l'exemplarité de la nouvelle condition (post)humaine, mais s'obstine à décrire la misère du monde contemporain, suggérant sarcastiquement l'impossibilité de l'utopie. *La Possibilité d'une île* – comme une suite possible du roman évoqué plus haut – développe la trame diégétique : entre les humains et les êtres de l'avenir, les Futurs, on interpose une espèce intermédiaire, les néo-humains, qui eux aussi affrontent tour à tour des obstacles et des supplices existentiels : l'utopie promise ne se matérialise jamais comme telle. Ce jeu du report du monde parfait reste l'indice d'une dérision qui définit, par excellence, *l'ironie ontologique* houellebecquienne et qui vise à avertir le lecteur du relativisme qui menace toute forme de réalité.

Conclusions – pour une morphologie de l'ironie posthumaine

Les exemples de la littérature de Michel Houellebecq que nous avons choisis illustrent fidèlement les rapports que l'écrivain français – dont l'œuvre a souvent été encadrée par les exégètes dans le paradigme post-humain – entretient avec l'héritage culturel, la réalité sociale contemporaine et les potentialités du futur. L'œuvre houellebecquienne est souvent constituée, de manière subversive, comme un système quasi éthique, toujours cristallisé sous le signe de l'ambiguïté et du fragmentarisme.

Programmatique (lorsqu'elle s'empare des conventions du monde littéraire et, en fin de compte, de la littérature elle-même), idéologique, sociale ou ontologique, l'ironie porte essentiellement, dans la littérature de Houellebecq, sur ces schèmes d'appréhension du réel. Les mécanismes de l'ironie ne sont pas radicalement renouvelés – si l'on songe au fonctionnement général d'une telle catégorie esthétique dans la culture occidentale –, mais ils prennent une couleur particulière dans le cadre spécifique des romans houellebecquiens (et, dans une large mesure,

²⁵ Hervé-Pierre Lambert, « La version française de l'imaginaire posthumain », p. 26.

dans la « littérature post-humaine »), par leur capacité à avouer la méfiance – comme geste fondamental des écrivains contemporains – par rapport au passé, au présent et à l’avenir de l’humanité.

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POUR UNE MORPHOLOGIE DE L'IRONIE POST-HUMAINE : LE CAS DE
MICHEL HOUELLEBECQ*(Abstract)*

This paper aims to analyze the way in which a fundamental concept of Western culture, irony, is re-substantiated in the posthuman episteme, starting from the symptomatic example of Michel Houellebecq. Whether it assumes a programmatic dimension or receives axiological connotations, the irony in question concerns the ideological, social or ontological challenges of contemporary reality. It is, in fact, an innovatively instrumentalized discursive mechanism in the context of "European posthumanism", a paradigm that is structurally different from the North American version of the current.

Keywords: posthumanism, Michel Houellebecq, irony, literary program, axiology.

PENTRU O MORFOLOGIE A IRONIEI POSTUMANE:
CAZUL LUI MICHEL HOUELLEBECQ*(Rezumat)*

Studiul de față își propune să radiografeze felul în care un concept fundamental al culturii occidentale, ironia, este resemantizat în cadrul epistemei postumane, pornind de la exemplul simptomatic al lui Michel Houellebecq. Fie că își asumă o dimensiune programatică, fie că primește conotații axiologice, ironia houellebecqiană vizează provocările ideologice, sociale sau ontologice ale realității contemporane. Avem de-a face, în fond, cu un mecanism discursiv instrumentalizat, în chip inovator, în contextul „postumanismului european”, paradigmă care se diferențiază structural de versiunea nord-americană a curentului.

Cuvinte-cheie: postumanism, Michel Houellebecq, ironie, program literar, axiologie.

MIRCEA ANGHELESCU – SCRISORI CĂTRE IOANA EM. PETRESCU

Texte stabilite, editare și note de Ioana Bot

Ne-a părăsit, în primăvara lui 2022, profesorul și istoricul literar Mircea Anghelescu. Autor al unor volume excepționale de istorie literară românească (*Preromantismul românesc* – 1971, *Introducere în opera lui Gr. Alexandrescu* – 1973, *Literatura română și Orientul* – 1975, *Scriitori și curente* – 1982, *Ion Heliade Rădulescu: o biografie a omului și a operei* – 1986, *Lectura textului* – 1986, *Clasicii noștri* – 1996, *Cămașa lui Nessus. Eseuri despre exil* – 2000, *Literatură și biografie* – 2005, *Mistificiuni* – 2008, ed. a doua – 2016, *Poarta neagră. Scriitorii și închisoarea* – 2013, *Lâna de aur. Călători și călătoriile în literatura română* – 2015, *Am fost martor* – 2017, *O istorie descriptivă a literaturii române. Epoca premodernă* – 2019), editor, filolog, cercetător științific la Academia Română, apoi – profesor universitar la Universitatea din București, Mircea Anghelescu este o personalitate de referință a vieții noastre științifice, pe care revista „Dacoromania litteraria” înțelege să o omagieze în numărul acesta, publicând în cele ce urmează dosarul corespondenței sale cu Ioana Em. Petrescu; scrisorile au fost păstrate în arhiva familiei Ioana și Liviu Petrescu (actualmente, la secția de Colecții speciale a Bibliotecii Județene „Octavian Goga” din Cluj)¹. Pregătind un volum de *Corespondență* al Ioanei Em. Petrescu, care va încheia, cel puțin deocamdată, seria de autor publicată de noi la Editura Casa Cărții de Știință din Cluj-Napoca în ultimii 14 ani, le-am editat în acest format, pentru a evoca – omagiindu-i pe amândoi, expeditor și destinatar al scrisorilor – o prietenie intelectuală de excepție a lumii noastre literare. Discreția amicitiei dintre Ioana Em. Petrescu și Mircea Anghelescu se întemeiază pe cărți, teme literare și... valori etice comune, despre care autorul scrisorilor de mai jos nu ezită să vorbească, cu accente ironice, ca pentru a potența solemnitatea ideilor înalte astfel expuse. Chiar și așa, în puținul lor aluziv (a se vedea gluma „junimistă” în care Anghelescu îmbracă directivele oficiale constrictive ale epocii), scrisorile degajă o tandrețe colegială și un spirit de echipă discret – cei doi scriu recenzii despre cărțile lor respective, schimbă idei și publicații, construiesc un dialog între specialiști, „*nel loro piccolo*”, încercând să eludeze impozițiile tot mai accentuate ale politicului asupra lumii intelectuale românești din anii '80. Aparținând aceleiași generații,

¹ Scrisorile fac parte din Biblioraftul 1, dosar 1, al arhivei Ioana Em. Petrescu (dosarele au fost ordonate alfabetic, după numele corespondenților).

Mircea Anghelescu și Ioana Em. Petrescu au, în anii acestui schimb epistolar, aproximativ 35-45 de ani: nu se tutuiesc, *nu discută decât despre ceea ce scriu (și despre ceea ce citesc)* și, cu toate acestea, epistolele degajă o loialitate amicală, o potrivire profesională luminoasă, pe fundalul tot mai întunecat al epocii respective.

Ioana Bot

[07.03.74]²

Doamnă,

Am primit astăzi cartea Dv.³ Sunt deosebit de sensibil la gestul Dv., cu atât mai mult cu cât vine partea unui coleg pentru care am multă stimă. Nădăjduiesc să pot scrie despre ea, deși (sau tocmai pentru că) nu sunt un foarte bun cunoscător al lui Budai Deleanu; am citit însă primele pagini ale cărții și sunt realmente încântat⁴.

Vă rog să credeți că mi-ați făcut o bucurie sinceră; vă rog să primiți omagiile mele și să transmiteți dlui Petrescu salutări cordiale.

Al Dv.
Mircea Anghelescu

București, 2 mar[tie] [19]74

P. S. Ca redactor, continui să aștept colaborarea amândurora (la o revistă care însă nu mai plătește colaborările!⁵ Ne-am „junimizat”...)

² Datările cuprinse între paranteze drepte, dinaintea fiecărei scrisori, indică data de pe plic și au fost reconstituite la arhivarea documentelor în fondul Bibliotecii Județene „O. Goga”.

³ Este vorba despre volumul Ioanei Em. Petrescu de debut, *Ion Budai-Deleanu și eposul comic* (la origini, teza sa de doctorat), publicat în 1974 la Editura Dacia din Cluj-Napoca.

⁴ Mircea Anghelescu a semnat, într-adevăr, o recenzie a cărții, în revista *Limba și literatură*, 1974, 3, pp. 606-607 (v. Dosarul de receptare critică al volumului, realizat de Ioana Bot și Adrian Tudurachi, în Ioana Em. Petrescu, *Studii despre Ion Budai-Deleanu*. Ediție restituită și note de Ioana Bot și Adrian Tudurachi, Cluj-Napoca, Casa Cărții de Știință, 2011, p. 351).

⁵ Este vorba despre *Revista de istorie și teorie literară*, publicată de Institutul de istorie și teorie literară „G. Călinescu”, al Academiei Române, din redacția căreia Mircea Anghelescu făcea parte.

*

[24.10.75] [I]

București, 19 oct[ombrie] 1975

Stimată Doamnă Ioana Petrescu,

Vă sunt foarte recunoscător că ați acceptat invitația noastră; sunt ultimul care ar dori să contribuie la întârzierea ediției D. Popovici, dar și participarea Dv. la acest număr al RITL⁶ mi se pare, din punctul nostru de vedere, foarte importantă. Vă rog să-mi trimiteți articolul Dv. [până] în ziua de 30 oct[ombrie]. Cinci zile în plus nu sunt mare lucru pentru autor, e drept, dar la mijloc e o duminică și poate reușiți să scrieți 5 pagini – 5 p[agini] 1/2. Vom publica articolul Dv. oricum ar fi, chiar de trei pagini, dar dacă cu această mică întârziere îl puteți face ceva mai cuprinzător, cu atât mai bine. Mă gândesc în primul rând la aspectul în pagina revistei: 5 p[agini] sau 5 p[agini] și jum[ătate] înseamnă câteva rânduri peste trei pagini de revistă. Iertați-mi calculele spițerești, dar și ele fac revista.

Vă mai rog să-mi permiteți ca, cel puțin la sumar, să adaug în paranteză, lângă titlu, ceva în genul acesta „lecturi cantemiriene”, „lecturi din Cantemir” sau altceva. Sumarele noastre sunt aprobate de secția [de] presă a C[omitetului] C[entral] și trebuie să fie explicate⁷.

Vă mulțumesc încă o dată pentru colaborare și pentru cuvintele măgulitoare pe care le aveți pentru mine și pe care știu că le datorez doar bunăvoinței Dv. Vă rog să primiți, Dv. și dl. Petrescu, deopotrivă, expresia sincerei mele stime,

Mircea Anghelescu

⁶ *Revista de istorie și teorie literară*.

⁷ Este vorba despre una din procedurile legale de publicare a revistelor (periodicelor, de orice fel) în perioada comunistă: numerele trebuiau aprobate de Comitetul Central al Partidului Comunist Român (o formă mascată de cenzură, în condițiile în care România lui Ceaușescu se lăuda cu desființarea cenzurii politice...).

*

[II]

București, 2 noiembrie 1975

Stimată Doamnă Ioana Petrescu,

Vă mulțumesc pentru articol, primit acum câteva zile, care este exact ceea ce ne trebuie. Pentru că presupun că nu primiseți scrisoarea mea înainte de a-l trimite, vă rog încă o dată să-mi permiteți să adaug titlului un subtitlu explicativ („lecturi cantemiriene” sau altceva mai inspirat, aștept sugestia Dv.)⁸.

Vă mai rog să aveți amabilitatea de a-mi scrie dacă îl cunoașteți pe studentul Ion Simuț⁹, redactor la revista *Echinox*. Mi-a trimis un articolăș ieri și, pentru că doar din câteva pagini e greu să-ți faci o părere, aș vrea să știu dacă e un om serios și poate fi încurajat.

Vă cer scuze pentru atâtea rugăminți. Omagii d-lui Petrescu

Cu mulțumiri,
Mircea Anghelescu

*

[28.03.80]

București, 26 III 1980

Stimată Doamnă Ioana Petrescu,

Am primit vol. IV din seria de *Studii literare* de D. Popovici¹⁰ pe care o îngrijiți, și vă mulțumesc. Cum știți probabil, este un autor de la care mi-ar fi plăcut să mă pot revendica. Cum, de bine-de rău, am deocamdată o rubrică

⁸ Articolul, despre care e vorba în această scrisoare, ca și în precedenta, va apărea cu titlul *Monocheroleopardul. Lecturi cantemiriene*, în *Revista de istorie și teorie literară*, XXV, 1976, ianuarie – martie, 1. Va fi reprodus de autoare, cu același titlu, în volumul Ioana Em. Petrescu, *Configurații*, Cluj-Napoca, Dacia, 1981, pp. 86-93.

⁹ Student la Facultatea de Filologie din Cluj-Napoca în anii respectivi – și redactor la revista studențească de cultură *Echinox*, publicată de Universitatea clujeană – Ion Simuț avea să se afirme deplin în deceniile 8-9 ale secolului trecut, devenind unul din cei mai importanți critici și istorici literari ai generației sale.

¹⁰ Este vorba despre D. Popovici, *Studii literare*, vol. IV („*Santa cetate*”, *între utopie și poezie*). Ediție îngrijită de Ioana Em. Petrescu, Cluj-Napoca, Dacia, 1980.

permanentă la *Transilvania*¹¹, dacă această „permanentă” mai durează, voi putea scrie o cronică la această ediție. Va fi realmente o plăcere pentru mine. Vă mulțumesc încă o dată.

Vă rog să transmiteți dlui Petrescu salutările mele colegiale.

Al dv.
Mircea Anghelescu

*

[12.07.88]
București, 5 iulie 1988

Stimată doamnă Ioana Petrescu,

Mi-a făcut mare plăcere recenzia Dv. din *Limbă și literatură*¹², pe care abia acum am văzut-o. Nu-mi fac iluzia că volumul merită toate cuvintele bune pe care ați avut amabilitatea să le spuneți acolo, dar chiar faptul că permiteți unui cititor atât de avizat să-l privească cu îngăduință, trecând peste omenescile lui lipsuri, mi se pare foarte mult. Cel mai mult mă bucură, desigur, că un cititor inteligent și binevoitor poate găsi cheia în care a fost scris și, implicit, intențiile limitate ale cercetării din care a rezultat.

Sunt bucuros că n-ați abandonat de tot ediția Popovici¹³. Sper că în Cluj aveți o vară mai puțin caniculară ca la București și puteți îndura mai ușor vremea și vremurile. Cu cele mai bune gânduri și o strângere de mână colegială D-lui Liviu Petrescu,

Mircea Anghelescu

¹¹ Este vorba despre revista de cultură *Transilvania*, din Sibiu, la care Mircea Anghelescu a colaborat, susținut, în anii '80.

¹² Ioana Em. Petrescu, „Mircea Anghelescu, *Ion Heliade Rădulescu*”, *Limbă și literatură*, XXXIII, 1988, 1. Recenzie reprodusă pentru prima oară în Ioana Em. Petrescu, *Studii de literatură română și comparată*. Ediție îngrijită, note și bibliografie de Ioana Bot și Adrian Tudurachi, Cluj-Napoca, Casa Cărții de Știință, 2005, pp. 232-235.

¹³ Editarea scrierilor lui D. Popovici (în seria de *Studii literare*, apărută la Editura Dacia, din Cluj-Napoca) întâlnea, la sfârșitul anilor '80, piedici noi, după mărturisirile Ioanei Em. Petrescu: planurile editoriale erau tot mai strict controlate, cerându-li-se să îndeplinească politica partidului unic și, pe de altă parte, să „economisească” materiile prime necesare tipografiilor... Tot atâtea modalități de a scădea de fapt, implicit, producția culturală care nu era neapărat favorabilă politicilor oficiale.

*

[15.09.89]

București, 7 sept[embrie] 1989

Stimată doamnă Ioana Petrescu,

Am primit ieri, cu mare plăcere, vol. VI al *Studiilor literare*¹⁴ ale lui D. Popovici. Nu mi se pare de prisos să vă spun încă o dată cât de importantă și de binevenită mi se pare publicarea lor; faptul că volumele au un reflex mai degrabă palid în publicistica imediată nu înseamnă că ele nu sunt citite cu plăcere și utilizate intens de cei cărora le-au fost destinate. În ce mă privește, voi recenza bucuros volumul în *Transilvania*, deși competența mea în materie este mai puțin decât mică.

Cred că fiecare din noi, în afara cercetărilor personale pe care le face, are datoria să-și pună cunoștințele măcar o dată în slujba resuscitării sau mai drepte cunoașteri și răspândiri a operei unui înaintaș; mă bucur – și cu mine atâția alții – că opera lui D. Popovici și-a găsit un editor de calitate Dv. Urmașii direcți caută în general să se elibereze de tutela și de sarcina acestei opere, sau dimpotrivă, se lasă copleșiți de ea. A-și face datoria și a rămâne discret și autonom în această întreprindere mi se pare un lucru cu totul deosebit. Am vrut să vă spun aceste lucruri pentru că nu le pot spune într-o recenzie.

Cu mulțumiri, al Dv.
Mircea Anghelescu

*

[25.10.89]

București 14 oct[ombrie] 1989

Stimată doamnă Ioana Petrescu,

Abia am primit volumul Dv.¹⁵ și am putut doar să-l răsfoiesc; îmi pare a fi un fel de despărțire de secolul trecut, una oficială ca să zic așa, pentru că despărțirea *de facto* era de mult vizibilă. Poezia epocii moderne și hermeneutica ei au de ce se

¹⁴ Este vorba despre D. Popovici, *Studii literare*, vol. VI (*Poezia lui Mihai Eminescu*). Ediție îngrijită de Ioana Em. Petrescu, Cluj-Napoca, Dacia, 1988.

¹⁵ Ioana Em. Petrescu, *Eminescu și mutațiile poeziei românești*, Cluj-Napoca, Dacia, 1989. Este ultimul volum antum al autoarei.

bucura. Noi, care rămânem pe poziții, neputând altfel, regretăm că v-am pierdut. Dar ne bucurăm totuși în numele ideii că nu se poate scrie bine despre poezia modernă fără să o cunoști bine pe cea dinainte; mi se pare că dv. – și cartea pe care am s-o citesc cu plăcere – ilustrați această idee.

Dar de ce această copertă ca un macrameu? Ascunde ea vreo simbolistică a penitei înaripate, sau e vorba de o explicație mai pedestră? Nu-mi luați în nume de rău această glumă și primiți, vă rog, felicitările mele cele mai sincere și mulțumiri pentru volumul pe care mi l-ați trimis.

Al Dv.
Mircea Anghelescu

MIRCEA ANGHELESCU – LETTERS TO IOANA EM. PETRESCU
(*Abstract*)

The intellectual life during communist Romania can be reconstructed, nowadays, through the private correspondence of its participants; these exchanges have gradually become public in recent decades. What we choose to present here comes from Ioana Em. Petrescu (1941–1990)’s private archive (located at the Special Collections department at the “O. Goga” County Library in Cluj). It contains letters she received from Mircea Anghelescu (1941–2022). Such documents are proof of the enduring quality of the intellectual exchanges between the participants and of the manner in which scientific networks were created and maintained during the communist period.

Keywords: Ioana Em. Petrescu (1941–1990), Mircea Anghelescu (1941–2022), correspondence, intellectual exchange, communism.

COMPTE RENDUS / BOOK REVIEWS

CORIN BRAGA (coord.), *Enciclopedia imaginariilor din România*, vol. I. *Imaginar literar* [*The Encyclopaedia of Romanian Imaginaries*, vol. I. *Literary Imaginary*], Iași, Polirom, 2020, 472 p.

The Encyclopaedia of Romanian Imaginaries. The Literary Imaginary is part of an ambitious collection aiming to map centuries of local civilisation: literature, religion, art, history, language. The volume edited by Corin Braga focuses on the various components of the literary imaginary, from folklore to postmodernism, diasporic writing and fantastic worlds, arguing for the study of the imaginary as a productive manner of (re)viewing literature, as well as a way of comprehending its crucial role in the negotiation of identity and alterity.

In this sense, Braga's introductory essay explains that, throughout the book, the literary imaginary is seen as comprised of "imaginary constellations" and "semantic basins", according to the model imagined by Gilbert Durand, rather than authors, literary periods, or currents. Because, to quote Braga, the imaginary has "its own logic of internal development", so that the encyclopaedia focuses not on isolated archetypes but on entire "figurative galaxies" and their systemic functioning. On the one hand, this resonates with the tenets of imagology (as defined by Beller and Leerssen, among others), as the main object of analysis is precisely the textual codification of certain mental images, with their occurrences and recurrences in Romanian literature. On the other hand, if it is our representations of geography, history, nature, and humanity that lead to the formation of knowledge and imbue the world with meanings and values, then the very structure of space and time in literature requires constant decoding. Let us take for instance the complementary chapters written by Cosmin Borza and Ligia Tudurachi, on the rural and urban imaginaries, respectively: Borza writes about the amalgamation of tradition, quaintness, oppression, and social protest that has become typical of the rural, while Tudurachi demonstrates that the urban imaginary can only be understood by contrasting its modernist configurations and the proletarian ones; thus, both essays reveal how the dominant narratives of Western modernity have been celebrated by Romanian literature (urban life as adventure, self-discovery, emancipation), demythologised (urban life as precarity, illusion, misery) and criticised (rurality as a complicated counterpart to the simplistic ideal of progress).

Despite the broad scope of inquiry, the volume also has a chronological structure, with the chapters forming an alternative history of Romanian literature – religious texts and revolutionary writing come first, while textualism and postcommunist fiction are among the last subjects. It is not an exhaustive historiography, nor is it meant to be; but it provides another way of conceptualising and visualising the evolution of literary themes, as well as detailed explanations of the factors contributing to the mutations of the imaginary. More precisely, the chapters present the birth, the development, the point of maximum irradiation, and the waning of the most important imaginary structures in Romanian literature. For example, Laura Zăvăleanu's analysis of the religious imaginary begins with 16th century moralistic texts but concludes with novels published only a few years ago, proving that certain aspects of this semantic basin – such as the principle of continuity or life as an intergenerational tale – span centuries and affect our understanding of literature today. Similarly, Sanda Cordoș structures the social imaginary on two axes, the literature of the oppressed and that of the revolutionaries, investigating the literary configurations of the revolution from the so-called birth of the nation in the 19th century to its supposed rebirth in 1989 and pointing out the apparently superficial changes (in clothing, for example) which suggest deeper, ideological differences.

Circling back to the introduction, Braga claims that the study of the imaginary today should primarily address the tension between globalisation and local specificity, that is, the phenomenon of *glocalisation*, since it is precisely the decrease in imaginary production and exploration that hinders integration, unity, and the celebration of difference. This imperative is reflected in the selection of the

most suitable methodologies for the investigation of each imaginary constellation, such as Eleonora Sava's chronotopic mapping, meant to reveal the most prevalent patterns of Romanian folklore. It also drives the exploration of widespread, transnational literary phenomena which had unique manifestations in the Romanian context. For instance, Adriana Stan's chapter focuses on the local emergence and development of the imaginary of authenticity, from its birth in the 19th century (under the influence of Romanticism and nationalism) to its latest rekindling by the 2000 generation (catalysed by the postrevolutionary obsession with memoirs and diary writing in the 1990s). Likewise, the postcommunist depiction of individual and collective trauma in Romanian literature is explained by Alex Goldiș through the unprecedented, radical nature of the 1989 revolution and regime change, unlike any other in the Soviet sphere of influence.

Finally, glocalisation impacts literary theory, as well, as proven by Mihaela Ursa's article on the theoretical imaginary of textualism, in which a mental image – the so-called "woven fabric" of the text – becomes the central metaphor of a local semantic basin, indicating and determining the status of the critic and the theorist in relation to the literary works they are evaluating. Just like Goldiș, who argues for the need to look at postcommunist Romanian literature through the prism of text and context, adding a historical dimension to the psychological direction of trauma studies, Ursa also shows that, when it comes to theory, the exploration of the imaginary must be supplemented by an anthropological perspective akin to the New Historicist one. Far from invalidating or abandoning the study of the imaginary – its inner workings, its specific mutations – these methodological twists help make the discipline more effective and relevant than ever.

Last but not least, the Romanian literary imaginary is discussed in terms of its transnational ties and internal cultural diversity, both of which complicate the formation of local identities, making them subject to constant dialogue, across borders, languages, and communities alike. Levente T. Szabó proposes one such transnational, *longue durée* approach in his analysis of Hungarian literature written in Romania as compared to pre-1918 Hungarian literature published abroad, with a focus on the imaginary of the Transylvanian regional identity. In her turn, Dana Bizuleanu engages with the imaginary of German-language literature produced in the same space, explaining that the geographical dispersion, religious plurality and diverse traditions of the German ethnics caused this particular semantic basin to be defined by cultural interference and hybridity. At the same time, the author mentions the marginal status of this literary niche in relation to both Romanian literature and German literature written in the West, which allows her to connect the close reading of various texts – uncovering the restructuring and reinvention of the German language by authors like Herta Müller or Oskar Pastior – to the issue of peripherality. As for the production of Romanian literature abroad, Laura T. Ilea posits the existence of a *metasporic canon* of belonging, referring to those authors who do not perceive themselves as part of the Romanian canon, while also eluding perfect integration into a secondary literary system. Looking at a significant number of writers whose relationships with the homeland and their adoptive culture are extremely different and nuanced, Ilea argues that the imaginary of the diaspora and exile should not be reduced to the local-universal dichotomy, considering instead the alternative forms of belonging developed by these authors as coping mechanisms and creative strategies.

While *The Encyclopaedia* is too thematically diverse and ambitious in scope to present exhaustively, these are a few of its strengths and worthy pursuits: an ability to combine the traditional study of the imaginary with other useful methodologies, a well-documented, chronological approach to an otherwise overwhelming wealth of information and literary phenomena, as well as a constant focus on globalisation, the endurance of local specificity, and the consequent mutations of the imaginary.

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MIHAI IOVĂNEL, *Istoria literaturii române contemporane: 1990–2020* [*History of Contemporary Romanian Literature: 1990–2020*], Iași, Polirom, 2021, 711 p.

Given the absence of critical syntheses on the post-communist Romanian literary system, Mihai Iovănel's project comes to make up for this deficiency by starting from an ideological dichotomy: left wing and right wing, the latter dominating the literary and critical field after 1989. In the same vein, the author emphasises a relationship of inclusion of two terms, which, with the radical change of the political regime, become malformed: one is a right-wing intellectual group, with a desire to preserve the reactionary elitism of the communist period, which is imposed by the second component, derived from the first. It is the *anticommunism* that has become the predominant ideology of the post-1989 years and that "does not represent a critique of real communism, but a discourse of self-legitimization that uniformly opposes bad communism to good capitalism" (pp. 36-37). Clearly, the perspective that Iovănel adopts in framing the evolution of Romanian literature over the last 30 years is essentially leftist, hence the materialist criterion he has in mind: *realism* as a "transgenerational operator", more precisely "the writers' relation to reality through a set of theoretical, rhetorical conventions, etc." (p. 11). However, there are also some unresolved inadequacies in the construction of the post-communist panorama. Firstly, Iovănel initially asserts that the transition from communism to post-communism is, in fact, the transition "from a stable system to an unstable system" (p. 25). It is well known that the last years of the ninth decade were among the most dysfunctional in socialist Romania. Secondly, the term "capitalist realism" is taken rather formally (not content-wise), as well as out of the need to have a theoretical framework within which some writers from a new wave, the one after 2007, when Romania joined the European Union and NATO, can be accommodated.

The second part of the book focuses on the evolution of the Romanian literary system and literary criticism. After all, Iovănel maps a cultural landscape that is not only heterogeneous and conflictual, but in which power struggles are at play more than new methodological directions or new ways of making literature are being debated. One of the problems from which the fetishism of literature derives, as well as the polemics between previous generations of critics (from the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s) and the generation of critics of the 2000s (otherwise, a quarrel that is still going on today) is the "autonomy of aesthetics" – an opportunity to revise the Romanian literary canon. Rooted in the deeply conflictual relationship between the two nineteenth century critics, T. Maiorescu and Constantin Dobrogeanu-Gherea, this principle of judging the value of a work is malformed over time, becoming, in fact, "more of a slogan, a simple template, in the name of which critics will seek to avoid referring to a reality outside the literary-autonomous one" (pp. 97-98). However, with the 2000 generation, the "fetishism of aesthetic autonomy" is abandoned, which entails, as Iovănel notes, the historicization of this principle, which is less and less important for a plethora of young critics and writers who relate openly, critically, politically committed to the socio-economic environment, to social inequalities of both class and gender. In the light of the latter idea, it is also no coincidence that women critical voices (Adriana Stan, Teodora Dumitru, Mihaela Ursa, Andreea Mironescu, Ioana Macrea-Toma) are rising from this generation, a fundamental aspect in the complexity of the Romanian critical system, deeply patriarchal until the 1990s-2000s.

The following parts of the *History* are devoted to the evolution of fiction and the evolution of poetry. From the perspective of prose, the post-communist period seems to be rather unfriendly to fiction, which makes biography gain an important place in the Romanian literary field, all the more so as in the 2000s authenticity becomes the main direction in both prose and poetry. After all, fiction seems to be affected by what is extraliterary: "The main pressure on fiction in the 1990s comes from two sources: gazetting and autobiographical nonfiction. Both point to a competition of fictionally

unmediated – or poorly mediated – reality to which after 1989 literature, and fiction in particular, must adapt” (p. 347).

Moreover, Mihai Iovănel works with a traditional dichotomy: realism and materialism. If in the nineteenth century one can find samples of realism in the Romanian novel still in its infancy (*Ciocoii vechi și noi*, 1863), later concretized in Ioan Slavici’s *Mara*, considered by Iovănel “the first great Romanian novel”, in the second part of the century two directions of realism develop: on the one hand, an “idealist-Hegelian” one, and, on the other, a “materialist-national” one. Influenced by the French movement *Le Nouveau Roman*, the writers of the 1980s generation embraced materialism as their method of working: “the materialism of the writers of the 1980s is a forced consequence of late communism [...]. They maintain a relationship of suspicion not so much with reality (which they claim to expose in more authentic versions than the writers of the previous generation) as with the method of the old omniscient and totalizing realism” (p. 357). In addition, Iovănel also exposes the ideological ambiguity underlying this preference of the 1980s generation of prose writers: because the textualist import from *Tel Quel* has a Marxist charge, Romanian authors have to put right this issue, since it was precisely against a regime (“at least in theory Marxist”) that they wanted to be subversive. Hence the reproach of escapism, which Iovănel immediately links to metafiction – the favourite sub-genre of these prose writers. This is the preamble to the years after the fall of communism, when materialism is strengthened by academic writers such as Ion Manolescu and Caius Dobrescu, then by Daniel Bănuțescu, Simona Popescu, Florin Chirculescu, Adrian Oțoiu and Răzvan Rădulescu. Under the same umbrella, the following two sub-directions are also underpinned by Iovănel’s ordering of the still not very innovative trends in the literary field in the prose of the 1990s: postmodernism – which melts reality into textual and bookish games – and “miserable realism”, which is much more in line with the precarious and unstable reality of post-communist Romania.

The situation changed in the early 2000s, with authors like Dan Lungu, Sorin Stoica, Ioana Bradea, Florin Lăzărescu, Lucian Dan Teodorovici. The notion under which they are gathered is the one I also noted in the objections at the beginning: the concept of “capitalist realism”. Their prose is uninhibited, designed to dislodge taboos and conservative attitudes. Another important year for the evolution of Romanian prose is 2010, when writers like Lavinia Braniște and Radu Pavel Gheo change direction in the sense that the protagonists are no longer people with an extremely precarious material condition, victims of the transition from communism to capitalism, but people with fairly stable jobs, with a material condition, if not very good, at least better than those in the prose of the 1990s. As far as poetry is concerned, the first two directions that dominate the period immediately after the fall of communism are postmodernism (as in prose) and neo-expressionism.

While the resources of postmodernism are also being exhausted rather quickly in poetry, the second trend has a longer life and a tradition behind it. Thus, poets like Mariana Marin and Angela Marinescu – established as highly appreciated writers before 1989 – are models for poets of the 2000 generation like Elena Vlădăreanu, Ruxandra Novac and Claudiu Komartin. For Radu Vancu, his forerunners are two poets from different generations: Mircea Ivănescu from the 1960s and Mircea Cărtărescu from the 1980s. So, as far as poetry is concerned, the bias and the networks are more clearly stable. Besides, poetry is the “section” where some important changes of optics occur grace to some new outlooks as the next ones: “exploring toxic hypostases of masculinity becomes a creative challenge” (p. 610), and the feminist direction takes a meaningful shape through poets as Svetlana Cârstea, Elena Vlădăreanu, Medeea Iancu, Iulia Militaru, and Gabriela Feceoru.

Last but not least, Mihai Iovănel also certifies a certain “posthuman moment” of Romanian poetry, which has its pioneer in Andrei Peniuc. Although, as a theoretical grid, posthumanism is still not very well defined in the Romanian literary field, Iovănel remarks a poetic phenomenon, born around 2010, relevant due to “the inevitable dispersion of references that had composed the canon until now, an opening towards more marginal and even extraliterary sources” (p. 618).

The Iovănel’s *History...* ends rather pessimistically with a chapter entitled “The Transnational Specific”, which deals with some models and strategies by which Romanian authors end up being exported and even gain symbolic capital outside Romania’s borders (Norman Manea, Paul Goma,

Mircea Cărtărescu). Of course, one of the current crises of Romanian literature is related to the (im)possibility of its export, or at least the failure to popularize Romanian authors abroad. Attempting a futurological view, Iovănel diagnoses the place and role of Romanian literature on the “World Republic of Letters” (Pascale Casanova) rather precariously: “Before it discovers Romania, the culture of Europe will have to integrate – as the United States does today – the cultures of Asia and Africa, and in a few decades, it will no longer recognise itself in the old photographs of the 20th century. Most probably, Romanian literature will survive, in the margin of future photographs, as a secondary character and an echo” (p. 680). It remains to be seen and analysed whether it will be so.

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MIRCEA ANGHELESCU, *Literatura în context*
[*Literature in Context*], Bucureşti, Spandugino, 2020, 288 p.

“Literature, in its entirety, is the only way to get to the knowledge of the past and implicitly to ourselves, the ones who live today” (p. 7) is the view of literature that Mircea Angheliescu defines at the beginning of his book, and also the perspective from which the critic approaches all the topics discussed. Providing a wide overview of the literary events, the monographies and the authors he discusses, the critic always places them against a historical and political background, thus offering a complete image of recent Romanian literary movements while also keeping in touch with the past.

As a collection of articles and book reviews published by the literary critic from 1970 (only one article published long ago) to 2020, the book covers a variety of topics with the merit of offering a wide image of the latest literary publications and monographies relevant to the development of the Romanian literary field.

Despite the variety of the topics discussed, what all the articles have in common is the rigorous structure that proves the thorough method of the critic based on two dimensions of the analysis. The articles comprise both textual analyses that systematically succeed in highlighting the distinctive points or credits of each book discussed, and especially the accurate placement of these texts in the historical or political context to which they are related. What is specific to the critic’s method is the interweaving of the two dimensions by correlating the literary phenomenon to the its background, thus obtaining a complete and accurate volume of research about literature placed in the context of and analyzed according to its circumstances. The textual analysis identifies the main subject of the books discussed by the critic, places them in the literary framework and sharply brings into focus the specific and main points of each one. The contextualization of the topics proves that the goal of the critic is to place literature against its context and emphasize the interconnection between literature and the background against which it is projected.

The only biography topic – Annotations on a library card – conjures up the critic’s experiences in the great libraries of the world, especially at the National Library in Paris. The rest of the topics are diverse, but can be identified by some common themes.

A recurring topic of the critic’s reviews is the literary texts related to – or about – the experience of exile. Exile is analyzed in the context of the Communism Regime in Romania and its implications for the lives of the writers forced to leave the country, such as Sanda Golopenția, Emil Cioran, Virgil Nemoianu or Constantin Eretescu. In these articles, the exile theme is discussed as a historical phenomenon affecting both the writer’s lives and their writings. The analysis of Cioran’s writings in particular is interesting as the critic follows the changes in the literary texts generated by the linguistic transition from Romanian to French. While discussing the political exile in *Dumnezeu s-a născut în*

exil [*God Was Born in Exile*] commented on by Constantin Eretescu, Mircea Anghelescu points out its ethical dimension by referring to the way exile literature manages to artistically transpose suffering into art: "Exile therefore leads to a metamorphosis where initiation represents the gain or compensation for whatever was lost to the world of pain" (pp. 104-105). Another reviewed book written by an exiled author, Theodor Cazaban, is *Coloane* [*Columns*], presented as another piece of literature that should be recovered by Romanian literary history. The critic pleads for the recovery of these writers, arguing two perspectives. On one hand, he brings into focus the values of the literary texts and their connections to the Romanian language and on the other hand he signals the writer's connections to Romania and the ways the political regime has wronged them. Their integration in Romanian literary history could become, thus, a form of redemption.

The same direction related to ways in which literature reflects life, especially its hard moments, is betrayed by the review of Geo Bogza's novel *Țări de piatră, de foc și de pământ* [*Lands of Rock, Fire, and Earth*] describing the most brutal, unfair and bloody tragedies in the lives of marginalized Romanian communities. The critic considers that the value of this novel consists in its power to offer a literary reply to a human and political matter. Another topic that belongs to the same moral dimension of literature is entitled "Romanul nescris al suferinței" ["The Unwritten Novel of Suffering"]. Mircea Anghelescu believes that it should have been written about the suffering of the Romanian people of Bessarabia, deported to Siberia after WWII. Even though these subjects are present in some confessions and documents, they remain unknown to most readers. That is why the critic asserts his need to write about the volume entitled "Arhivele memoriei" ["Archives of Memory"], which stands as a testimony to the troubled history of Romania.

The same category comprises the volume of essays and reviews "Revanșa literaturii" ["Literature's Retaliation"] to which the critic attributes the merit of projecting literature against the historical and cultural context that generated it in order to reflect larger aspects of reality. Another similar topic is Liliana Corobca's monography about the communist regime in Romania, which should be publicized "to pay tribute to the courage and perhaps the talent of certain writers whose bones were left in the prisons of that time, along with their manuscripts forgotten in the censors' drawers" (p. 210).

A particularity of this book consists in the two instances of recalling the personality of Alexandru Macedonski, the Romanian poet with a passion for velocipedes. These episodes describe two moments in the poet's life: his journey to Italy as a young man and his record of it, and his 300-kilometer-long journey from Bucharest to Brașov and back on a velocipede. These biographical events reflect the critic's interest in lesser-known aspects of writers' lives, and provide at the same time a perspective for a more complete insight into their personalities and works. Another interesting topic is the city of Bucharest in life and literature. The parallel between the ways in which Bucharest appeared in literary and non-literary texts in the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth, and the ways modern times effected changes to the city is an invitation for the reader to contemplate the way in which reality is transposed into literature.

Another topic of these articles are the reviews and book analyses belonging to lesser-known authors who deserve to be brought to the reader's attention or whose valuable literature deserve to be incorporated into Romanian literary history. To this category could belong Grigore Cugler, Sanda Nițescu, Horia Bădescu, Radu Ciobanu, Horia Bădescu, Toma Pavel, Vintilă Ivănceanu, Cezar Baltag and Marin Sorescu as an essayist. The same direction integrates articles dedicated to the activity of literary critics, valuable intellectuals or mentors who contributed to Romanian literature and especially to Romanian culture, such as Paul Miron, Alexandru Ruja, Matei Călinescu, Marta Petreu, Mihai Dinu, and Dinu Pillat.

The book also contains reviews of anthologies and criticism, such as the Sibiu Literary Circle seen from Italy, Nicolae Manolescu's article in *Enciclopedia literaturii române vechi* [*The Encyclopaedia of Old Romanian Literature*], edited by Eugen Simion in 2018, and the review of *Antologia poezilor minori din epoca Alecsandri & Bolintineanu* [*Anthology of the Minor Poets from*

the Alecsandri & Bolintineanu Era]. These articles cover theoretical and literary-historical topics, demonstrating the author's widespread knowledge of the field.

The novels *Ion* and *Țiganiada* are examples of how the critic analyses a literary work by highlighting the specificity of each book. Regarding the work of Budai-Deleanu, the critic believes that the author created his characters starting from an archetypal scheme reflecting the human condition longing for universal harmony, explaining why the novel is described as the first modern writing work in Romanian literature. *Ion* is described as “romanul dăinurii”/ “the novel of permanence” (p. 56).

As a whole, despite its varied topics, the book has the merit of painting a broad fresco of the Romanian literary and cultural field, with the ambitious aim of highlighting some authors or subjects that the critic believes should be more widely known. In Romanian literary history and research, the volume represents an important step towards the recognition and recovering of such cases. It is a modern book, in the sense that the subjects approached are actual and relevant for the latest literary movements, and, at the same time, it is anchored in the past, following the historical thread that generated these publications. Literature is placed in context and this book achieves his goal, taking us a step further towards a better understanding of history and the way in which it is reflected by – and in – literature.

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MAGDALENA RĂDUȚĂ, *În context. O lectură sociologizantă a literaturii române din ultimul deceniu comunist* [*In Context. A Sociological Reading of Romanian Literature from The Last Communist Decade*], București, Muzeul Literaturii Române, 2019, 202 p.

Magdalena Răduță is currently one of the most relevant researchers in the Romanian theoretical practice of literary sociology. Trained in the sociology of literature at EHESS, there she started to research the Romanian literary field during the Communist period through a sociological lens, her methodological formation and competences proved in her works are undeniable. Her sociological reading is focused on the 1980s generation, reclaimed from a symbolic ordering principle opposed to the politically engaged and ideologically submissive factions. These themes, explored through a series of exhaustive studies developed by Magda Răduță over the years, have been compiled in her 2019 book *In Context. A Sociological Reading of Romanian Literature from The Last Communist Decade*.

Two enormous merits of the book should be highlighted from the start: first of all, this book had been written from both a sociological and a philological perspective at the same time. As such, her consistent methodological competences are manifest. Secondly, Magda Răduță has written this study not only from an academic perspective, but as a professor of sociology of literature as well. Thus, her study is especially valuable from two points of view: as academic material, it can serve as an aid to acquire a deeper understanding of Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical reflections and their theoretical and ideological limitations; on the other hand, the book contains a rigorous explanation and illustration of the practice of the sociological approach to the literary phenomenon, as well as to the reading of literary texts.

Magdalena Răduță's work endeavours to depict the dynamics of the Romanian literary field during the 80s, when the literary activity was mainly supposed to react to the political and economic pressures marking the whole mechanism of publication, circulation, and legitimation of literary goods. Against this background, confrontations are explored between the heteronomous and autonomous factions, between the protochronistic group and those agents reclaiming themselves from an aesthetic position, as well as the generational confrontations and agents' particular interests in different types of gain. The dynamics of the field are followed from the evolution of the young generation of writers having asserted themselves during the 1980s, styled as the "young wolves", who quite quickly capitalised the pole of disinterested temporal recognition. The adoption of a critical position with regards to the political regime, as well as a chaotic literary system marked by the institutional anomies determine the strength of polarisation within the field.

From this standpoint Magda Răduță's study comprises four major parts. Whilst the first chapter of her study includes a short history of the theoretical import of the discipline of literary sociology into the local literary studies, the second and the third chapters cover a sociological analysis of the Romanian literary field during the 1980s. Finally, the last chapter of the book proposes a "Flaubertian reading" of Mircea Nedelciu's novel, *Tratament fabulatoriu* [*Fabulatory Treatment*] (1986).

As revealed in Magda Răduță's studies, the sociology of literature was greeted with reluctance after 1989, due to the local misunderstanding of systemic and contextual reading implicitly related to the Marxist (another concept misleadingly used in the Romanian literary space) literary criticism imposed during the 1950s. As an effect, all sociological approaches are perceived as Marxist practices, and as such strongly discouraged by the established practices of literary criticism as implicitly related to the Communist past of literary criticism in Romania. In this vein, she highlights the demarcation of Bourdieu's methodology from the Marxist sociological approach, avoiding the concept of capital in its the narrower Marxist understanding. Moreover, the present study points out the boundaries and delimitations of the new post-Bourdieuian theories (practised by G. Sapiro, E. Pinto, Denis Saint-Jacques, Alain Viala etc.). At the same time, Magda Răduță generously discusses the methodological reformulation required by the analysis of an ideologically and politically infused literary field.

While analysing the route of consecration of the "young wolves", the research focuses in turn on several main characteristics and directions that have defined the assertion of the 1980s generation of young writers: their subversive and anti-systemic agenda, the literary and intellectual ethos that mobilised their writing activity, the *esprit de corps* cohesion emerging from belonging to a guild and from informal literary gatherings. Lastly, an important part of Magda Răduță's research is dedicated to the literary polemics that capitalise the debates in the cultural press. The delimitation of the young generation occurs at the level of public polemics, but instead of perpetuating these polemics (which quite quickly become undesirable as they reveal individual positions and assertions), they promote and legitimise, by means of these debates, their own legitimacy and the validity of their *esprit de corps*, as well as their disinterested ethos.

The "Flaubertian reading" of Mircea Nedelciu's novel is a didactic and rigorous demonstration of how Bourdieusian reading works. Moreover, the sociological reading of *Fabulatory Treatment* proves an undoubtable illustration of how this methodological lens can explain the entire literary phenomenon through the text, since the main literary sociologist's perspective proposes a reading from text to context, and I would say that Magda Răduță's sociological analysis Nedelciu's novel is the first rigorous demonstration of Flaubertian reading applied to a Romanian literary text. Her sociological reading is not limited to the text but embeds a short history of the paratextual elements and the book's publication history, which contain many important keys to understanding the novel.

Finally, as already mentioned, *In Context. A Sociological Reading of Romanian Literature from The Last Communist Decade* constitutes one of the most important literary sociological studies published about the Romanian literary field and one of the most relevant recent works of sociological studies dealing with the cultural phenomenon during Communism, along with Ioana Macrea-Toma's book *Privileghenția. Instituții literare sub communism* [*Privileghentsia. Literary Institutions in*

Romanian Communism]. The singularity of Magda Răduță's study is ensured by three important points in her work: firstly, the special temporal focus on a specific period and on a specific literary faction, which allows a rigorous analysis of these aspects; secondly, the meticulous methodological explanations and illustrations and finally, a certain didactic dimension. Taken together, these render *In Context. A Sociological Reading of Romanian Literature from The Last Communist Decade* an important reference work and a required title in the academic bibliographies of the local literary studies. Unfortunately, the present study has gone largely unnoticed by the public, and I would say this is real proof of the poor adherence of literary sociology to the local field of literary studies, as well explained and argued in the present work.

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IOANA BOT, *Icoane și privazuri. 7 studii despre figuralitatea literară [Icônes et chambranles. 7 études sur la figuralité littéraire]*, Cluj-Napoca, Casa Cărții de Știință, 2021, 218 p.

Publié en 2021, le volume *Icoane și privazuri. 7 studii despre figuralitatea literară [Icônes et chambranles. 7 études sur la figuralité littéraire]* est signé par Ioana Bot, critique et historienne de la littérature, professeure à l'Université Babeș-Bolyai de Cluj-Napoca, qui propose, à la lignée de ses préoccupations antérieures pour l'étude des formes littéraires et pour la poétique historique, une recherche passionnée, centrée sur la *figure* et le *figural* dans la littérature roumaine.

Avant de suivre le fonctionnement de ces deux concepts dans les œuvres des écrivains roumains choisis (tels que Mircea Nedelciu, Radu Cosașu, Mircea Cărtărescu), dont certains d'expression française (comme Lena Constante, Marthe Bibesco, Matéi Vișniec), l'auteure réalise d'abord dans le premier chapitre du livre un éclairage théorique extrêmement dense. Elle retrace admirablement l'histoire de la notion de *figure* en partant des études fondatrices d'Erich Auerbach, qui avait observé la dimension dynamique du terme à commencer par les définitions de l'Antiquité latine, et continue avec les recherches de Laurent Jenny, qui opère une différenciation entre *figure* et *figural*, qu'il comprend comme processus esthétique-sémantique, à la fois tensionnel et représentationnel. Le troisième repère théorique substantiel ayant contribué, selon Ioana Bot, au développement de la notion de *figuralité* dans le champ des études littéraires est, finalement, Paul de Man, puisqu'il associe le mot avec l'allégorie, expression elle-même de l'indécidabilité du sens.

Tout en apportant ses propres observations judicieuses visant les questionnements théoriques du *figural* en littérature, l'auteure tire des conclusions convaincantes et se lance ensuite à l'analyse de plusieurs ouvrages différentes de point de vue générique – qu'il s'agisse de mémoires, de la prose ou du journalisme littéraire. Selon le cas, la démarche critique interroge soit la capacité du *figural* de garder l'indicible de l'expérience humaine (chez Lena Constante), soit la capacité subversive du *figural* par rapport au contexte socio-politique (chez Mircea Nedelciu ou Radu Cosașu), soit, dernièrement, la capacité du *figural* à transformer la rhétorique consacrée en poétique actuelle (chez Mircea Cărtărescu), sans oublier, bien évidemment, les stratégies du *figural* chez les écrivains bilingues franco-roumains (Lena Constante, Marthe Bibesco, Matéi Vișniec).

Même si d'étendue inégale, les sept études sont également captivantes, à commencer par la première, très riche en commentaires et en exemples, portant sur les mémoires carcérales de Lena

Constante, cette « Schéhérazade de l'enfer » qui utilise la formule du journal intime comme *figure* littéraire pour évoquer une souffrance qu'elle a pu surmonter seulement grâce au pouvoir inépuisable des mots. Les deux études suivantes changent de direction, se dressant d'un côté vers la prose fictionnelle, pour expliquer le mécanisme subversif (et ses pièges inhérents) dans l'écriture de Mircea Nedelciu qui avance à l'époque communiste une fausse « transmission directe » des faits, et de l'autre côté vers la prose journalistique de Radu Cosașu qui convertit stylistiquement l'énumération cumulative dans en *figure*, une figure du réel s'opposant foncièrement à la mise en narration des événements. L'œuvre de Mircea Cărtărescu jouit de deux approches critiques qui visent l'attraction de l'écrivain pour le sonnet comme *figure* de la perfection, mais aussi la *figure* de l'expression des sentiments dans le texte littéraire, qui implique à son tour un jeu conscient avec les clichés afin de résoudre l'impasse de l'incapacité du langage de transmettre de manière authentique le vécu. Enfin, la dernière étude du livre réunit trois auteurs roumains d'expression française – Lena Constante, Marthe Bibesco, Matěj Višniec – pour souligner l'emploi du *figural* dans le cas particulier des écrivains exilés.

Docte et sagace, le travail critique de l'auteure réussit ainsi à montrer que devant les « icônes » de la littérature le geste de l'interprète ne doit jamais être celui de l'acceptation docile du sens ostensible, mais celui du dialogue intrépide avec le texte et ses *figures* les plus profondes.

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ANDREI LAZĂR, *L'Autobiographie entre le texte et l'image*, Cluj-Napoca, Casa Cărții de Știință, 2021, 478 p.

La collection « belgica.ro », accueillie par la maison d'éditions Casa Cărții de Știință depuis 2003, grâce à une très fructueuse collaboration avec le Centre d'Études des Lettres Belges de Langue Française de l'Université Babeș-Bolyai de Cluj-Napoca, compte à ce jour plus d'une quarantaine de titres. Dirigée par Rodica Lascu-Pop, professeur émérite à la Faculté des Lettres, la série se propose de rassembler des études critiques, des thèses de doctorat, des traductions littéraires et des textes inédits pour les lecteurs roumains et francophones. Ainsi, le volume signé par Andrei Lazăr, *L'Autobiographie entre le texte et l'image*, vient enrichir cette collection singulière dans le paysage éditorial roumain. Issu d'une thèse de doctorat soutenue en 2013, le volume reprend, reconferme et renforce les hypothèses critiques d'une minutieuse recherche menée par l'auteur dans le domaine des études autobiographiques. L'enjeu d'Andrei Lazăr est ambitieux et généreux, car le livre est le résultat d'une analyse des causes, des modalités, des fonctions et des mutations engendrées par le passage du discours autobiographique littéraire vers le langage des images et des médias alternatifs-filmiques. L'architecture du livre intègre un champ très vaste d'étude, qui traverse les domaines de la philosophie, de l'anthropologie et de la littérature, en explorant les œuvres de Jean-Paul Sartre, Marguerite Yourcenar, Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida et Hervé Guibert. En effet, l'originalité de cette approche résulte justement du choix de réunir pour la première fois sous une seule problématique des auteurs relevant des espaces différents de la pensée.

Centré sur le cas du récit autobiographique, le travail se propose comme un véritable exercice d'arpentage herméneutique qui dévoile les stratégies de la transmédiatité. Ainsi, Andrei Lazăr poursuit d'un part le phénomène de la migration du récit autobiographique de la littérature vers les médias et dévoile les transformations inhérentes reçues par le support de l'œuvre. D'autre part, il interroge les conséquences des stratégies de production, de diffusion et de réception au niveau de

l'auteur, du narrateur, du sujet et de la représentation du soi. Chaque instance de migration oblige l'auteur à s'approprier des instruments critiques spécifiques, c'est-à-dire capables de gérer le code esthétique du médium recevant. Cependant, l'approche transmédiatique agglutine des outils transdisciplinaires qui rendent possible un discours intersémiotique commun à l'analyse littéraire, photographique et cinématographique.

Pour ce qui est la structure, trois grandes séquences articulent cette recherche qui prend en compte l'autobiographie en tant que forme intermédiaire : la première partie vise « L'autobiographie au miroir de la théorie. Rhétorique de l'objectivité », la seconde porte sur les « Postures et impostures autoréflexives. Poétiques de la subjectivité » et la troisième concerne « La traversée des miroirs. L'espace autobiographique intermédiaire ». Chronologiquement, la démarche recouvre l'intervalle compris entre 1964, à savoir l'année de la publication chez Gallimard du volume sartrien *Les Mots*, et 2002, l'an de la sortie du film *Derrida*, réalisé par Amy Ziering Kofman et Kirby Dick. Apart les cinq auteurs qui forment le corpus d'analyse, il faut remarquer également la richesse des références aux études récentes portant sur la narratologie transmédiatique et l'automédialité. Andrei Lazăr met en équilibre l'hétérogénéité référentielle par l'entremise d'une charpente théorique et conceptuelle parfaitement équilibrée dès le début jusqu'à la fin de la recherche. L'exkursus s'avère méthodique, consistant et s'adresse aussi bien au lecteur avisé, qu'au celui qui est en train d'approfondir ses études en sciences humaines.

La première partie vient éclaircir le cadre théorique et institutionnel qui circonscrit le genre autobiographique. Le terme d'« autobiographie » s'est imposé pendant la seconde moitié du XIX^e siècle comme un synonyme pour les confessions. Les usages « classiques » emploient le concept dans le sens plus strict d'une biographie rédigée par une personne sur soi-même. Après les années 70, le récit autobiographique s'est intégré dans le système littéraire comme un genre qui détient une structure propre, qui a une histoire et un statut spécifique. À présent, le « moi » qui se dévoile par l'intermédiaire de ce genre littéraire n'est plus à confondre en termes d'identité et rapport entre le soi et les autres avec ce « moi » rousseauiste du XVIII^e siècle. Le « moi » qui surgit après la « mort de l'Auteur » représente l'effet d'un iconoclasme structuraliste qui lui donne la possibilité d'exister entre les marges du langage et de l'écriture. Comme l'auteur le montre dans la deuxième partie de sa recherche, ce « moi », noyau de l'écriture autobiographique de Jean-Paul Sartre, Marguerite Yourcenar, Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida ou de Hervé Guibert, se constitue par la force de la mémoire et par les astuces d'autoréflexivité purement subjective qui annule l'exigence de la véridicité et la nécessité d'un pacte. Ces énormes ressources intérieures nourrissent sa vulnérabilité, mais aussi son unicité et lui confèrent un contenu spéculatif avec un grand potentiel intermédiaire.

L'analyse menée par Andrei Lazăr saisit, dans la troisième partie du volume, la tournure de l'autobiographie littéraire classique vers l'automédialité désignée en tant que capacité d'un sujet d'utiliser plusieurs médias (l'écriture, la photographie, le cinéma) pour achever un nouveau « rapport à soi » et des « pratiques de soi » inédites. L'autobiographie intermédiaire se constitue comme un réseau de « produits médiatiques » autonomes, mais qui relèvent d'une cohérence d'ensemble garantie par la présence de l'écrivain. Les médias alternatifs offrent des possibilités différentes pour la manifestation du récit de soi. La conséquence de cette diversité créative et expressive affecte directement le nouveau statut de la littérature, qui n'est plus la forme définitoire pour la construction de soi, mais seulement une option parmi les autres. En même temps, l'autobiographie s'affranchit des restrictions objectives et des limites stables du décidable, en gagnant une liberté fictionnelle, structurelle et symbolique qui légitime la pluralité de lectures fragmentaires. Le corpus porté par l'intermédialité fonctionne d'une manière rhizomatique, en tant que composite dont les parties s'articulent dans un réseau dynamique de structures arborescentes qui ont la capacité d'engendrer des significations multiples et inédites.

À la fin de l'analyse des œuvres investiguées, Andrei Lazăr expose un paradoxe constitutif du récit autobiographique qui est rendu cohérent par le recours aux stratégies métatextuelles et par l'emploi des supports documentaires visuels, mais qui contient également une « non-adhérence de soi à soi » et une coexistence du passé et du présent. L'espace autobiographique intermédiaire contient

l'œuvre littéraire et ses transformations médiomorphosées, à savoir la photographie et le film autobiographique, mais il requiert toujours le regard questionneur du lecteur-spectateur capable de saisir dans toute son ampleur l'exercice inter-artistique et créatif de l'auteur. C'est pourquoi l'écriture restera le point d'ancrage qui confère l'intelligibilité de chaque projet et de toute possibilité intermédiaire de mise en scène du soi.

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ANDREW HUSSEY, *Speaking East. The Strange and Enchanted Life of Isidore Isou*, London, Reaktion Books, Limited, 2021, 324 p.

In 1999, British historian Andrew Hussey was working on Guy Debord's biography and thus needed to speak to a septuagenarian Isidore Isou (1925–2007, the Romanian father of Lettrism), given that the two writers' former friendship had quickly turned to sheer hatred. The result was, of course, somewhere along the lines of what should have been expected by anyone who ever approached one intellectual to ask about another, who (adding insult to injury) is also a mortal rival. The discussion thus diverged towards "another, altogether more compelling story" (p. 8). This one.

There are no two words better suited to be in the title of this book. *Strange* and *Enchanted* truly form the best mixture to cover and define its contents. At the same time, one would not be too far off the mark by extending the list of attributes with additions such as highly entertaining, spicy, informative and utterly horrifying, not necessarily in this order, but successive enough so as to easily turn *enchanted* into *enchanteing*.

The story begins in Botoşani (*Yiddishland*, or even the-place-formerly-known-as *little Leipzig*), Isidore Isou's birthplace, which "was once a handsome town", *once* being the operative word here. Thus, part one of three, "A Romanian Youth (1925–45)", details the social and political context of the Jewish communities in Romania at that time. The fear and misery present in the provincial town, caused by mouth-foaming anti-Semitism, are placed within the larger Romanian historical context, with the mention that Isou almost actively avoided approaching this facet of his very early childhood, with one exception in the form of the quasi-fictional novel, *Adorable Roumaine*, written in 1975 and published in 1978, which was "commissioned by a soft-porn publishing house and Isou wrote the book to make some money, which at this point in his life he badly needed" (p. 28).

After 1933, Isou's family moves to Bucharest and, from this point on, the voice of the narrator reaches its full volume. The tone that encompasses the story is jarringly captivating and the narration is almost movie-like. The all-knowing resounding voice of the narrator often resembles different forms of the "but little did he know..." trope. One such example would be "Soon Bucharest was to be convulsed by an earthquake, a mini-civil war, anti-Jewish riots and finally deportations and massacres of Jews [...]. But for the first months in the capital after finishing his school exams he was haunted by an image: the ghost of a girl he had tried to kill" (p. 36). The girl in question was part of a failed ploy – an attempt to drive her to suicide, her corpse then representing his first work of art, in a Duchamp ready-made fashion. The plan never came to fruition, but the episode did find its way into a strongly fictionalised version, in his *L'Agrégation d'un nom et d'un messie*.

This first part follows the tumultuous years of Isou's youth in Romania and it is a highly detailed recount of his group's *evolution* (a questionable word choice, I suppose) to full-fledged hooliganism

– mostly pertaining to sexual assault, sexual harassment, theft, fraud, destruction of property, to put the all too graphic examples of the manifestations of the “freedom” and “adventure” sought in the name of their anti-philosophy into today’s legal terms (rather than merely slapping a “thrill-seeking” label on the criminal actions of youth). The targets were usually the (apparently) all too gentle and thus vulnerable and easily-intimidated members of the bourgeoisie, but there is one example in which they pushed the limits into truly dangerous territory – “The plan was to go into a brothel and sleep with the most expensive girls without paying. The very real danger here was that they were no longer taunting the genteel bourgeoisie of polite society but tricking gangsters and pimps who knew how to use knives and guns. The ‘adventure’ was to occur in a place called Crucea de Piatră (The Stone Cross), where the most notorious and expensive brothels in Bucharest were to be found” (p. 41). And it succeeded. The manifestations of anti-philosophy applied to real life did actually have their limits, and these limits are equally graphically described as having been witnessed by and repulsed Isou: “[Bif] was as cruel as ever. His final act, or boast according to Isou, was to impregnate a sixteen-year-old virgin with syphilis [...]. He literally fucked her to death. Finally – at last – Isou was shocked. This was not an avant-garde prank – a ‘hilarious trick’ – but simple murder” (p. 44).

All recounts of the Pogrom are soul-shattering, and those of Isou’s experiences are equally so. As the large-scale events of the greater history become increasingly more brutal, the storyline gains two narrative planes – the background, i.e. the overwhelmingly large chain of events that became *the* history, and the foreground, i.e. the (bio-)story. Although parallel, the two communicate constantly, the explosions going off in the background either damaging or illuminating the foreground. The story under scrutiny here illustrates a stylised take on the idea of *scalar* history, from the ground up, from the lower, subjective memory, to the aerial – agreed-upon – objective history. As opposed to first-person recounts, which rely heavily on the limited foreground bound within the singular field of vision, Hussey’s biography uses the historical scalar gaze in combination with the re-focusing mechanisms of his own prose. The resounding voice of the storyteller is capable of both: “It was around this time that Isou had his first case of gonorrhea” as a result of a somewhat sexually disappointing encounter (p. 66), and “Isou now felt as if his body were on fire. The rubber truncheon was like a torch that lit fires in his lower back and buttocks. He was reduced to a throbbing piece of meat, barely a human being” (p. 52), a result of the anti-Semitic beatings. The first part ends with the ominous and, by now, characteristic voice of the narrator: “By daybreak, he would be in Paris”.

The second part, “Paris Seen by a Stranger (1945–68)”, outlines the context in which the literary destiny of Isou was in a *nowhere to go but up* type of a situation: from “Isou had now been in Paris over four months and was still not famous” (p. 139), to the immense failure that was the first conference meant to replace surrealism with lettrism – attended purely by accident by “the inmates of a local orphanage” who “did not understand that Isou was reading lettriste poetry; they simply thought that he was speaking Romanian, which they did not understand.” (pp. 140–141).

History continues to happen in the background of what is truly in focus – for instance, after painting the picture of the real world of 1947, with the power plays between Moscow and the former Allied forces, with the Marshall Plan and French politics, Hussey follows up by pointing out that “In the opening weeks of 1947, however, all of this was secondary to a singular event of world-historical importance: on 26 January, Isou and the lettristes were featured in an article in the *New York Times*” (p. 153). The Parisian literary social life has always been a subject that stirred the interest of one and all, especially if it came with the promise of offering a narrative glance into the scandalous back alleys of the savoury lives of writers and artists. Hussey does indeed offer the readers the expected zest in this regard, by narrating an episode that took place in Café de la Place Blanche, which extended the list of people towards whom, for Isou, there apparently could be no other feeling than deep hatred – as was the case of his hatred for Victor Brauner, who was an “arse-licker” and who, with his one good eye, “squinted fiercely at Isou”, or Andre Breton, who “was actually a deeply mediocre man” and “a ridiculous fat vegetable” (p. 173).

As with most forms of daring and transgressive manifestations that come into the public view, these too tend to come under aggressive moral and legal scrutiny, interspersed with outraged support.

The somewhat predictable trajectory of writings that (quite willingly) injure the surrounding sensibility is condensed in the fairly self-explanatory subchapter “Sex, Prison and Revolution”, which obviously depicts Isou’s clash with censorship and prudishness in the moral climate of post-war Paris. The waves and subsequent short imprisonment were caused by *Isou ou La Mécanique de femmes*, since Isou *pioneeringly* considered that “nothing could be more fundamental and important in the sexual act than knowledge of how women enjoyed sex. [...] Making women enjoy sex was, however, an art that everybody could master if they followed Isou’s rules and principles” (p. 180). The badge of honour thus gained (the public reprimand was met with support from those who opposed censorship of sexual material) laid the grounds for the image of the martyr, the genius and the self-declared Messiah. Part two also recounts his trips to Israel and his marriage to a Christian woman for whom he *allegedly* converted to Christianity. Moreover, it would appear that it was for her that he ever wrote the only poem in proper French, entitled *À ma femme, pour lui prouver que je sais faire un poème à mots*. The painstaking quest for fame, with its ups and downs, takes place within the whirlwind of the Parisian Left Bank, all the while drenched in Isou’s relentless (over?)confidence in his genius. Lettrism eventually does walk the path of failures and successes and does indeed gain the recognition necessary for the establishment of a literary genre.

Part three, “The Divinity of Isou (1968–2007)”, follows the period of his psychiatric treatment and his pursuit for eternal life. The Epilogue, however, explains the biographer’s choice of title: “in this tradition, language is not only ultimately the word of God, but the pathway towards God. So *lettrisme* is not simply a new technique in art, poetry or painting, but literally the voice of the Absolute. [...] Isou’s life and work, seen in this way, is simply the twentieth-century version of an old tradition: a rejection of failed Western rationalism in favour of the irrational as the way towards divinity – literally ‘speaking East’” (p. 299).

Andrew Hussey narrates a life in a form that is by no means exclusively tragic, crushed by hardship, struggle, pushed and tugged by the violence of history and whatnot (although it was, and this aspect is definitely neither overlooked nor shrugged off), but one that is truly ‘strange and enchanted’, the story of which follows a delightful strolling pace, interrupted by moments of shock and awe. *Speaking East* is far from a heartstring-tugging approach to the brutal events that befell a people in the context in which the world was a truly terrible place. All that is there, of course, but it does not necessarily aim to emphasize the “correct” stance that needs to be taken by a reader moved to tears. It inflicts a combination of delight and discomfort (if we were to avoid more extreme pairings such as amusement and sheer horror) – a sort of discourse that wraps the reader in a warm, but slightly moist blanket, all while continuously (and secretly) increasing and decreasing the temperature in the room.

One would think that taking a sledgehammer to the thick layer of fiction covering a story that employs large-scale historical events and small-scale biographical truth may seem like an easier task when speaking to the creator who had poured the layer there in the first place. One would be wrong. *L’Agrégation* is one piece of fiction in particular which Hussey approaches as the layer that needs to be slowly chipped away from the historical block beneath. Biographies come in all shapes and sizes, whether they are assumed as such or not, but they do tend to both pile on top of and uncover the details rooted in reality, which makes the navigation between the two actions that much more difficult. But along comes the biographer’s prose, in all its compensating glory. The narrative is filled with short, matter-of-fact-like utterances that, due to their contents, knowingly urge the reader to keep reading. One such example would be “Isou decided to become a prostitute” (p. 135) – straight to the point and, albeit not entirely surprising, given the nature of the story, intriguing enough to incite in the reader an *oh, goody* type of somewhat conspirative excitement.

The tone and style are not meant to lecture or to convey a set of bio-bibliographical data on Isidore Isou. This is a task adequately covered by literary anthologies, dictionaries or encyclopaedias. Andrew Hussey’s style is miles away from that of a near-sighted, sweater-vest-wearing scholar. The genre itself seems to have moved into climates in which such garments would be unbearable and

unnecessary – the newer approaches call for the intelligent combination between puckishly lighthearted and meticulously researched. *Speaking East* is both.

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IULIA TEGGE, *Mirajul reflectării. Spre o istorie a metaficțiunii în romanul românesc* [*The Mirage of Reflection. Towards a History of Metafiction in the Romanian Novel*], Alba Iulia, OMG Publishing, 2021, 250 p.

Iulia Tegge's study shows that metafiction is not only a postmodern style of prose, but a phenomenon that has been present in the earlier forms of novel in Romania. She also addresses the way literature and art in general discuss the idea of creation (both as a final product and as a process). Tegge defines metafiction as the fluid process of an author's "narcissistic narrative". Tegge discusses Linda Hutcheon's approach to metafictional discourse, according to which metafiction could be pinpointed to the 18th century and Romanticism. Iulia Tegge remarks that Romanian studies only discuss metafictional discourse from a one-sided perspective, considering it a product of postmodernism. Thus, she takes into account Patricia Waugh's study *The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*, where the author claims that metafiction is linked to the "novel's identity". However, her main argumentation point is Linda Hutcheon's perspective on the metafictional novel, according to which by way of metafiction one can understand the relationship between fiction and reality.

The book is divided in two parts. The former presents theoretical approaches and the latter describes the way the author surrogate is embodied in the Romanian novel. In "Premise teoretice" ["Theoretical Premises"] Iulia Tegge theorizes metafiction from a chronological point of view. She mentions the fact that European theoreticians working around 1950s–1960s started to address the idea of the *Nouveau roman*, with Robert Alter focusing the discussion on metafiction in 1975. However, Tegge highlights that forms of metafiction were present long before the 1970s and that metafiction could be understood as "fiction about fiction". She also mentions the way the authors usually create an *alter ego* in their writings that generates confusion for many non-specialized readers. Iulia Tegge considers metafiction a complex phenomenon also to be found in certain forms of *Bildungsroman* or more precisely *Künstlerroman*, focused on the artist's life journey.

The second part, "Recurențe ale personajului scriitor în romanul românesc" ["Recurrences of the Writer-character in the Romanian Novel"], shows the fact that metafiction is linked to the writer/artist-character trope by analyzing novels by D. Bolintineanu, Pantazi Ghica, Anton Holban, Camil Petrescu, Mircea Eliade and H. Bonciu. The 1840s mark the beginning of the Romanian Romantic movement, with authors imitating different popular forms of literature from France or Europe and presenting different perspectives on how the novel emerged in the Romanian literature. Iulia Tegge discusses the way in which *Manoil* by D. Bolintineanu addresses the relation between the author and the character, mentioning that N. Iorga acknowledged *Manoil* as the first important Romanian novel, while also noting that D. Bolintineanu's next novel, *Elena*, is better written. Tegge notices that the author's surrogate, Manoil, is an aspiring writer who strives to be recognized as such, but another aspect is that through Manoil, D. Bolintineanu reveals the writer's status in 19th century Romania. Many critics have not discussed this dimension of D. Bolintineanu's novel, arguing that Manoil lacks plausibility, yet G. Călinescu stated that *Manoil* and *Elena* mark the beginning of the Romanian novel. Fiction becomes a pretext in Bolintineanu's novel. As Tegge would point out in her

analysis, Bolintineanu discusses the marginal status of the writer and offers his insights on the state of the National Literature.

Tegge also analyses the novel *Un boem român* [A Romanian bohemian] by Pantazi Ghica. While D. Micu and Ion Rotaru consider Pantazi Ghica's writing devoid of any literary value, Ștefan Cazimir commends Pantazi Ghica for his efforts of theorizing the novel in Romania. Tegge mentions that there is only one monographic study concerning Pantazi Ghica, the one written by Viorica Diaconescu, with the author interested in the relation between the author and the main character and in the fact that Pantazi Ghica could be one of the first theoreticians of the Romanian novel. While discussing *Un boem român*, Tegge notices that Pantazi Ghica oscillates between realism and romanticism and argues that using literature as a topic in different writings strengthens the idea that metafiction is not a product of postmodernism. Pompiliu Constantinescu considers that the interwar novel is a result of the social changes inherent to the times, switching from confession to reflection on what society looks like at a particular moment. Iulia Tegge also mentions that N. Manolescu divides authors into those that problematize the political and social changes, and those that write in a more subjective manner and who are interested in the psychological effects and changes in society. Even though during that period E. Lovinescu was promoting the objective prose, Tegge mentions that an important change defining the interwar period was how the novel started to approach different subjective perspectives.

Iulia Tegge's analysis continues to focus on Anton Holban's novels, where the author's life resembles the main character's, Sandu. The novels *O moarte care nu dovedește nimic* [A Death That Proves Nothing], *Ioana* and *Jocurile Daniei* [Dania's Games] are written in a subjective manner, enhanced by the first-person perspective. N. Manolescu and Alexandru Călinescu discussed the way the first-person perspective of the narrator gets confused with the real-life author's perspective, but E. Lovinescu and Pompiliu Constantinescu considered Anton Holban's writings closer to a *pseudo-diary* because of the confessional manner employed. Tegge highlights the fact that by writing about Sandu's ideas about literature, authorship, and even about the process of writing, Anton Holban employs a metafictional approach. Tegge discusses the distance between the main character and the real-life author in Holban's writings, and the way this distance keeps getting smaller, as Sandu faces similar issues about writing as Holban does. Iulia Tegge remarks that Holban resorts to intertextuality and concludes that his style of writing is influential in modernizing the Romanian novel.

Further on, Tegge analyses *Patul lui Procrust* [Procrustes's Bed] by Camil Petrescu, focusing on how subjectivity and authenticity are approached in this novel. She points out that the role of the narrator is only to encourage the other characters to write. However, what the author also managed to achieve in this novel is a discussion about how novels should be written and approached. Like Anton Holban in his use of intertextuality, Camil Petrescu mentions other texts he has authored, such as *Ultima noapte de dragoste în ziua de război* [The Last Night of Love, the First Night of War] or his play *Suflete tari* [Strong Souls]. Tegge argues that this method enhances the authenticity of the text, noting that the narrator's insertion and the motivation to convince Lady T or Fred Vasilescu to write mark Camil Petrescu's role as a predecessor of postmodern literature. Tegge also mentions that *Patul lui Procrust* [The Procrustean Bed] aims for a plural perspective, and that every one of the four central characters (the narrator, Lady T, Fred Vasilescu and Ladima) could easily be considered an *alter-ego* of the author.

Iulia Tegge goes on by analysing Mircea Eliade's approaches to a pre-metafictional novel. As in the case of Camil Petrescu or Anton Holban, authenticity plays a major role in the construction of the novel, with Eliade's writings on the edge between fiction and journal. Here, Tegge analyses *Romanul adolescentului miop* [Diary of a Short-Sighted Adolescent], *Nuntă în cer* [Marriage in Heaven] and *Șantier* [Worksite]. She notices that Eliade's approaches are usually subjective and influenced by realism and that *Romanul adolescentului miop* resembles a diary. Unlike the authors mentioned before, Eliade uses writing as a process of self-discovery. Tegge proceeds to analyse *Șantier*, which also is on the verge between journal and fiction, as it describes the time Eliade spent in India. Nonetheless, it is considered a novel because Eliade himself thought about it that way. Perpersicius

and Mircea Handoca consider *Şantier* a very important novel because of its focus on Eliade's process of writing rather than on his personal life. Like Petrescu and Holban, Eliade resorts to intertextuality, mentioning two texts still unpublished at the time. Tegge finds *Şantier* relevant for the metafictional discussion because of the way the Author-Narrator and the authenticity-intimacy relationships are approached. Furthermore, she notices that many critics have failed to discuss the writer's condition in *Nuntă în cer*, focusing on the love plot between Andrei Mavrodin and Ileana instead. Even though Tegge also finds the love plot to be the central plot of the novel, she believes that *Nuntă în cer*, as well as Eliade's previously mentioned novels, showcase the relationship between the Author and the Narrator.

In her process of outlining metafiction, Tegge also mentions the avant-garde writer H. Bonciu. Even though his writings are surrealist, resorting to different symbols, he still discusses the writer's condition and how literature is perceived. Tegge mentions that Bonciu uses a more hybrid style of prose, blending different forms of expressionism, avant-gardism, surrealism and even autobiography and authenticity in *Bagaj. Strania dublă existență a unui om în patru labe* [*Baggage. The Strange Double-Life of a Man on All Fours*] and *Pensiunea doamnei Pipersberg* [*Mrs Pipersberg's Guesthouse*]. The narrator is the link between these two novels, bearing the same name as the author. Tegge indicates that H. Bonciu's novels encourage the reader to identify the real-life author to the narrator. In this part of the analysis, Tegge concludes that metafiction could not be completely attributed to postmodernism, since throughout history many authors have discussed literature in their own texts.

In "Concluzii. Spre o istorie a metaficțiunii" ["Conclusions. Towards a History of Metafiction"], Iulia Tegge emphasizes the fact that Robert Alter is one of the first theoreticians that attributed metafiction to modernist fiction, while in fact it can be encountered even in earlier novels such as Cervantes' *Don Quixote* or Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*. In Tegge's study, Linda Hutcheon's contributions are relevant for the matter of metafiction, as she not only continued to expand Robert Alter's theory, but also argued that the role of the Author-Narrator relationship is important in metafiction. Furthermore, Tegge acknowledges Anamaria Blănuș's thesis about contemporary metafiction, pointing out that studies about metafiction are scarce in Romania. As the border between the author and the narrator is slowly fading, Tegge discusses the role of self-reflexivity in literature, and how every author analyzed created different characters that questioned what literature is. *Manoil* and *Un boem român* are for Tegge two of the most representative novels that mark the origin of metafiction. Moreover, she continues by showcasing the importance of Holban's and Petrescu's characters, who try to define literature in their own terms, erasing the fine line between the real author's and the narrator's credo. Finally, by analyzing Eliade's and Bonciu's novels, Tegge demonstrates that metafiction has been strongly highlighted in prose long before postmodernism.

Iulia Tegge's study aims to describe and demonstrate that metafiction is not only a postmodernist process, as it is encountered in different periods of time, from the beginning of the Romanian novel. She analyses some peaks of Romanian literature, emphasizing the fact that self-reflexivity, subjectivity, the confessional manner and the Author-Narrator relationship are usually found in earlier stages of the Romanian literature. She offers an extended bibliography pointing to the fact that she is not only trying to define metafiction in Romanian literature, but also to research it from a historical point of view. Taking all this into account, Iulia Tegge's study is relevant for the Romanian novel, offering a broader perspective on the phenomenon of metafiction outside the boundaries of postmodernism.

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