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**ON A MANIFESTO-BOOK:
LITERATURE IN PERIL BY TZVETAN TODOROV**

In the well-known manifesto book published in 2007 under the title *La littérature en péril (Literature in Peril)*, Tzvetan Todorov examines the current trends in literary criticism, pointing out the dangers that threaten, in his opinion, theory and the artistic creation of the time. While a literary work naturally represents a “discourse on the world”, according to the modern perspective of formal criticism it becomes an “object of closed, self-sufficient, absolute language”¹. The primary function of literature – as a path towards knowledge and self-knowledge – dissolves, thus, into a textual hermeneutics without a finality in this regard. The only way to return to the register of significance, of the prevalence of meaning over structure would be, as Todorov maintains, to release literature “from the smothering corset in which it is enclosed, from factual formal games, nihilistic whining and solipsistic egotism” and to free criticism from the “formalist ghetto that is of interest only to other critics”².

There would therefore appear to be three trends that threaten the very status of literature: formalism, nihilism and solipsism. The sources of these orientations should be sought in the different contexts of literary reflection, in its interferences with various cultural, philosophical, political or social elements that are characteristic of the period.

While formalism, promoted by the Russian School, appeared – as T. Todorov explains – in response to the ideological critique imposed in the communist totalitarian space and targets a certain autonomy of the aesthetic, nihilism and its consequence, solipsism, can be viewed in a wider philosophical context. Broadly, this is the waning of metaphysics, together with that of Kantian criticism, whereby knowledge loses its totalizing function and descends from the thing in itself, deemed to be unknowable, onto the phenomenon, and from reason to experience. Practical reason and aesthetic contemplation become the only ways of access to an absolute that, in turn, tends thus to draw closer to the domain of the existent as such. The merging between the real and the rational, in Hegel’s philosophy, where the absolute is thought itself thinking itself, is another turning point in modern speculation, inclined, henceforth, towards the abolition of the old distinction between the transcendent and the immanent. Drawing on Hegel, German romanticism promotes knowledge that privileges feeling, intuition, values from the

¹ Tzvetan Todorov, *La Littérature en péril*, Paris, Flammarion, 2007, p. 31: „comme objet langagier clos, autosuffisant, absolu”.

² *Ibidem*, p. 85: „le ghetto formaliste qui n’intéresse que les autres critiques”.

aesthetic sphere, in the original sense of the term. Nihilism, however, as the dissolution of the idea of eternal, transcendent truth, appears with Nietzsche, and paves the way of modern relativism, where subjectivity takes the place of any objectual representation that has truth value. The position of art in this context is apparently paradoxical. Prized by Kant, through the theory of aesthetic contemplation, absolutised by the romantics, understated by Hegel, who, moreover, announces its end, and praised by Nietzsche, whose overman – as a substitute of the Creator – is a creator par excellence, art is subject to the dispute referring to the creation-contemplation relationship, and the precedence of one over another. From the Hegelian prophecy about the death of art to prognoses concerning the disappearance of philosophy itself, already present in Heidegger, the distance is not long. Phenomenology, existentialism, positivism, pragmatism, instrumentalism, etc. discuss the problem of man as a being in the world, as existence, as an absolute subject, without an *a priori* relation to any transcendent truth. The essentialist, ontological outlook is replaced by an anthropological, hermeneutical or structural perspective. The analytical philosophy of Wittgenstein, the philosophical hermeneutics of Gadamer, the relativism of Richard Rorty, the structuralism or deconstructivism of Jacques Derrida tend to reduce philosophy to closed structures and specific languages, according to the same tendency to entrench meaning at the immanent level of existence.

The situation is similar regarding the “existent” as a text. The counterpart of the Death of the Father, proclaimed by Nietzsche’s philosophy, is the death of the author, declared by critics such as Roland Barthes. From an absolute creator, the author becomes a “paper being”, an impersonal voice dispersed in infinitely interpretable structures of the text. The myth of the creator, acclaimed by the romantics, turns into a cult of the oeuvre, only to eventually descend to the level of writing, as a system of decipherable signs in a closed referential code. Form and substance merge, therefore, at the level of the existent as a text. As a “world within the world” in Jean Starobinski’s terms³, the literary work naturally follows the current trends in philosophy, de-ontologizing and immanentizing meaning in favour of a vision that privileges the infinite potential of interpretation. This is, obviously, a perspective opposed to the romantic conception, which credited the artist with the attributes of divinity and the act of creation with supremegnoseological value, compensating for the loss of the supremacy of reason in the process of knowledge.

The “world within the world” is the text that loses its author in modernity as a reaction to the romantic aesthetic, with Mallarmé, Rimbaud, and especially Valéry,

³ Jean Starobinski, *Relația critică* [*The Critic Relation*]. Translated by Alexandru George, preface by Romul Munteanu, București, Univers, 1974, p. 33.

whence the “New Criticism” of formalist extraction descends⁴. For Valéry, for instance, “the author is almost a useless detail”, and works are merely the “daughters of their form”⁵. Consequently, biographical criticism loses ground in favour of the anti-romantic aesthetics of the concrete, where the text – a self-contained universe – proclaims its full independence.

If the literary work is a world without an author in a world without an author, meaning corresponds to a system of signs within another system of signs, that is, to interpretation as process. The proliferation of reading methods and reception theories in modernity is the natural consequence of moving the focus from the author onto the reader and of the change undergone by classical theories on contemplation and imagination, in the sense that the centrality of the object of knowledge is relinquished in favour of the cognitive process itself. Contemplation gradually becomes a re-creation and not a simple “viewing” of the object in the etymological sense of the “theoria” because, as Gilbert Durand claims, “contemplating the world already means transforming the object”⁶. In turn, imagination no longer envisages a mere copy of the real, the appearance of an appearance, in the Platonic sense, but a “way to charge things universally with a second meaning”⁷, endowed with a universal and transcendent function. This imaginary is specific to both creation and reception, the latter representing a re-creation of the work on subjective grounds. Already for Sartre, the literary object has no substance other than the subjectivity of the reader, as it is a synthesis of creation and perception.

The proliferation of reception theories and critical methods is justified in this context. The critics of “new criticism”, such as, for example, Tzvetan Todorov, complain about the modern world’s loss of interest in literature, not to mention the crisis of art in general, a subject of debate since the early twentieth century. The repudiation of historicism and biographism in criticism encounters, in the literary sphere, a tendency of progressive de-fictionalization, an aesthetic of authenticity that privileges autobiography, the document, the journal, in other words the private genres in general. In addition, what are becoming more visible are the “biographism” inherent in the work of fiction and the inevitably imaginary component of subjective literature.

⁴ Eugen Simion, *Întoarcerea autorului. Eseuri despre relația creator-operă* [*The Return of the Author. Essays on the Relation between Creator and Literary Work*], București, Cartea Românească, 1981, p. 50.

⁵ *Ibidem.*, p. 51.

⁶ Gilbert Durand, *Structurile antropologice ale imaginărilor. Introducere în arhetipologia generală*. Translated by Marcel Aderca, preface and postface by Radu Toma, București, Univers, 1977, p. 510; cf. Gilbert Durand, *The Anthropological Structures of the Imaginary*. Translated by Margaret Sankey and Judith Hatten, Mount Nebo (QLD, Australia), Boombana Publications, 1999.

⁷ *Ibidem.*, p.471.

The trend towards the abolition of the distinction between the so-called “imaginative literature” and confessional literature is calling into question the very theory Proust expounded in his essay *Against Saint-Beuve*, marking the twilight of biographical criticism. As it is known, the French writer asserts the existence of two selves, namely a superficial self, manifesting itself in quotidian life, and a deep self, specific to the artistic act or, in other terms: a self that is empirical, mundane, subject to becoming, and another that is surreal, immutable. The dissociation, of Platonic extraction, between a “selfish I” and a “superior I” appears, not by chance, already with Novalis⁸, because the prototype of the deep self, contemplating the Ideas, is in perfect consensus with the romantic self. The author’s “empirical I”, the object of biographical criticism, would thus be irrelevant to a literary work in which only the other I speaks, the deep I, separated from all its determinations.

The numerous controversies surrounding this distinction, launched both in Western and in Romanian criticism, merely confirm the progressive trend of “secularization” to which the so-called “deep I” has been subjected and the direction in which contemporary literary reflection is heading. The questions refer, of course, to the condition of possibility for an I that is completely unaltered by the avatars of otherness and its various contexts. Most of the critics who approach this problem state, or at least suggest the impure nature of the two subjective entities.

In 1981, Eugen Simion devoted an ample study to the “return of the author”, signalling, like Tzvetan Todorov, the deficiencies of “new criticism”: “One fact seems undeniable to me in the criticism of the past two decades: the literary work is starting to lose its priority. The work exists to justify a method and not vice versa. Even methods that swear on the text and nothing but the text swear, in fact, on the text as a pretext for the method. We read as a way to verify an analytical approach. A significant overturn: the method pre-dates the work. The work does not impose or alter in any way the tools of interpretation. The more penetrable and obedient the book, the higher the value of critical discourse”⁹. The critic’s plea for the “return of the author” is predicated on the reconciliation between the “Beuvian self” and the “Proustian self”, in favour of a totalizing vision that could include both the alleged impersonal and the personal voices of the writer, both his deep and his empirical selves. It would be a possible merger between the two components, at the levels of both the creation and the reading experiences, where, according to Roland Barthes himself, the historical subject of the reader also has a say, consisting of a combination of “biographical, historical, sociological, neurotic elements”¹⁰.

⁸ See Angela Ioan (ed.), *Arte poetice. Romantismul [Poetic Arts. The Romanticism]*. Preface by Romul Munteanu, București, Univers, 1982, p. 24.

⁹ Eugen Simion, *Întoarcerea*, p. 89.

¹⁰ Roland Barthes, *Le plaisir du texte*, Paris, Seuil, 1994, p.99.

The proliferation of subjectivities as a result of the vanished referential paternal authority allows for an extreme permeability of all the constituent elements of the literary work and for its openness to all its possible contexts. Even if the distinction between the author's supposedly deep and superficial selves is maintained, the tendency towards the "secularization" of the former, corresponding to the current cultural context, entails a shift of meaning onto the latter. The sliding emphasis from knowledge to interpretation and from object to subject may be a consequence of the death of the author, but also a hidden promise of his return, not in an *a priori* way, but as a mere meaning-bearing possibility.

It is this "return", moreover, that Tzvetan Todorov also advocates, as he does not position himself against a particular approach to the text, but believes that all are methods complementary: "'Man' and the 'work', 'history' and 'structure' are equally welcome."¹¹ The theorist's only desire is that literature should return to its object, namely the human condition, and that criticism should resume its natural mission of reflection on the meaning of the literary work.

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¹¹ Tzvetan Todorov, *La Littérature*, p.87: „L'« homme » et l'« œuvre », l'« histoire » et la « structure » sont également bienvenus”.

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TODOROV
(Abstract)

Based on Tzvetan Todorov's book, *La littérature en péril* [*Literature in Peril*] (2007), this study briefly examines the relationship between literary and philosophical reflection today. The anti-metaphysical strand of modern thought has naturally also permeated literary works and criticism, in the sense that the emphasis has shifted from meaning onto structure and from the author onto the reader. The disallowance of biographism ranks among the consequences of the modern cultural paradigms. The return to meaning advocated by the critics of "new criticism", such as Tzvetan Todorov or the Romanian Eugen Simion, also involves, however, a return of the author, even if merely as a constituent of the text.

Keywords: Tzvetan Todorov, literary work, author, biographical criticism, Eugen Simion.

DESPRE O CARTE MANIFEST: *LITERATURA ÎN PERICOL* DE TZVETAN
TODOROV
(Rezumat)

Pornind de la cartea lui Tzvetan Todorov, *Literatura în pericol* (2007), studiul de față analizează succint relația dintre reflecția literară și cea filosofică actuală. Orientarea antimetafizică a gândirii moderne se răsfrânge în mod firesc și asupra operei și criticii literare, în sensul deplasării accentului dinspre semnificație înspre structură și dinspre autor înspre lector. Repudierea biografismului se numără printre consecințele paradigmatelor culturale moderne. Întoarcerea la semnificație, reclamată de criticii „noii critici”, precum Tzvetan Todorov sau, la noi, Eugen Simion, implică însă și o întoarcere a autorului, fie și doar ca element constitutiv al textului.

Cuvinte-cheie: Tzvetan Todorov, operă, autor, critică biografică, Eugen Simion.