

## THE IRONY OF ION NEGOIȚESCU

For the reader familiar with I. Negoïtescu'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. Negoïtescu's writing? At the same time, the study aims to follow the consequences of irony in the work (and life) of Negoïtescu, 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, Negoïtescu 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. Negoïtescu 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"<sup>1</sup>.

In the evolution of Negoïtescu'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 Negoïtescu stands out and in the middle of which the young critic feels in his own element. Too little of his early journalism ("we refer

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<sup>1</sup> 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. Negoïtescu 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”<sup>2</sup> as the wanderings into the far-right legionary movement<sup>3</sup> are categorized by the author in the years of maturity) heralds such a mutation. However, Negoïtescu’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) Negoïtescu develops an ironic, and therefore essentially critical, direction.

Irony is among the assumed, emblematic dimensions of the Sibiu group. And Negoïtescu 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. Negoïtescu. 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”<sup>4</sup>, 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 such<sup>5</sup>. As for the atmosphere of the Literary Circle, reconstructed from exegesis and memoirs, I. Negoïtescu together with Radu Stanca impose a certain tone finding its proper resonance in the company of colleagues such as Cornel Regman, I.D. Sîrbu, Ștefan Aug. Doinaș 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. Negoïtescu 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

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<sup>2</sup> I. Negoïtescu, *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”.

<sup>3</sup> The most competent synthesis of I. Negoïtescu’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.

<sup>4</sup> 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.

<sup>5</sup> See Ion Vartic, “Lovitura de stat de la Cercul Literar și urmările sale” [“The *coup d’etat* 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*]<sup>6</sup>.

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 version<sup>7</sup>. 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” literature<sup>8</sup> of the fifth decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> 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 19<sup>th</sup> 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 romanticism<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> 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 acoperișul prefecturii, lângă o mitralieră care mă intimidă fiindcă habar n-aveam cum se mănăiește și nimeni n-a avut bunăvoința să mă lămurească. Nu mă simțeam deloc la larg acolo, însă nu puteam lăsa să fie considerat laș 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 încolțit de ironiile necruțătoare 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 ‘credița’ și, redevenind eu, am scris *Povestea tristă a lui Ramon Ocg*”.

<sup>7</sup> Marta Petreu, *Blaga, între legionari și comuniști*, p. 251.

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

<sup>9</sup> Corina Croitoru, *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. 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”<sup>10</sup>. The specification is valid for the poetry of the Sibiu Literary Circle. But Negoïtescu’s literary career, taken as a whole, does not remain confined to the borders of aesthetic irony. “Note that in the case of I. Negoïtescu, we have an increasingly sharp evolution from the assertion and preservation of ‘aesthetic exclusivism’ to those of political engagement”<sup>11</sup>. After the geographical dispersion of the group, Negoïtescu’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 wing<sup>12</sup>.

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 Negoïtescu 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”.

<sup>10</sup> *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”.

<sup>11</sup> 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. Negoïtescu, o evoluție tot mai tranșantă dinspre afirmarea și conservarea ‘exclusivismului estetic’ spre angajarea politică”.

<sup>12</sup> I. Negoïtescu, 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 face<sup>13</sup>.

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 long<sup>14</sup>.

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

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

<sup>14</sup> 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 cenaclurilor 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”.

reflection<sup>15</sup>. 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. Negoïtescu 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*]<sup>16</sup>, an essay thought by the critic and poet of the *Echinox* literary magazine to be written by I. Negoïtescu. 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 Negoïtescu 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”<sup>17</sup> 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 Negoïtescu'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 him<sup>18</sup>.

Another indicator of the fact that no one other than Negoïtescu 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 Negoïtescu, he would be a universal writer. great aesthetic vocation, great cultural foundation. morbid modesty. lack of ambition that

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

<sup>16</sup> 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.

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

<sup>18</sup> *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 ambition<sup>19</sup>.

The charming part of Negoïtescu'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 favour<sup>20</sup>.

In the archive entrusted to Dan Damaschin by I. Negoïtescu, 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. Negoïtescu and II: for the establishment of May 13 as a holiday of the Literary Circle"<sup>21</sup> – 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 monograph<sup>22</sup>. The common denominator of those documents (besides their dating and Negoïtescu'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. Negoïtescu'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

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 134-135: "extraordinar talent literar (poate cel mai mare talent al literaturii române). Dacă ar avea și inteligența artistică a lui Negoïtescu, 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".

<sup>20</sup> *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".

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 128.

<sup>22</sup> 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 adversity<sup>23</sup>.

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 Circle<sup>24</sup>, 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

<sup>23</sup> *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”.

<sup>24</sup> 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, 1943<sup>25</sup>; “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 Negoïțescu 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”<sup>26</sup>. Negoïțescu 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...<sup>27</sup>.

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<sup>25</sup> Reproduced by I. Negoïțescu 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.

<sup>26</sup> 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”.

<sup>27</sup> I. Negoïțescu, *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 specific, 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), Negoïtescu 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”<sup>28</sup> 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 personal<sup>29</sup>.

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”<sup>30</sup>. 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”.

<sup>28</sup> „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.

<sup>29</sup> I. Negoïtescu, *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”.

<sup>30</sup> 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 exclusivity<sup>31</sup>.

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 Negoïtescu'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. Negoïtescu) make a clear distinction between provincialism and the province as an autonomous space, susceptible to acculturation"<sup>32</sup>. 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 influence<sup>33</sup>. Negoïtescu 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"<sup>34</sup>.

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:

<sup>31</sup> I. Negoïtescu, *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".

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

<sup>33</sup> Marta Petreu, *Blaga, între legionari și comuniști*, pp. 282-285.

<sup>34</sup> 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 School<sup>35</sup>.

"Pășuniști și 'nemuritori'" ["Pășunișts and 'Immortals'"] represents the peak of I. Negoïtescu'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, Negoïtescu'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. Negoïtescu. 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"<sup>36</sup>. 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

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<sup>35</sup> 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".

<sup>36</sup> 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”<sup>37</sup>.

However, Negoïțescu's contemporary rival achieves an update: “he frequents Camil Petrescu, discusses Baudelaire, dresses like a Malagamba but thinks about restoring Maria Cunțan”<sup>38</sup>. Negoïțescu'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 organises 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 Inău<sup>39</sup>.

Negoïțescu 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.

<sup>37</sup> Published originally in *Saeculum*, II, 1944, 1 (January-February), pp. 78-81, reedited in I. Negoïțescu, *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 școlariții 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 coarnea 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 dumineca pantofi de lac, să frecventeze regulat festivalurile, să se cutremure citind Regina Ostrogoților, să plângă de duiosi citind Mamina și Tătunu și să danseze tangoul dar să-i doară inima după sârbă”.

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

<sup>39</sup> *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”.

Negoïtescu 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. Negoïtescu 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 different<sup>40</sup>.

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”<sup>41</sup>. 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. Negoïtescu 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

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<sup>40</sup> I. Negoïtescu, *În cunoștință de cauză*, p. 12: “Pentru noi, literatura română nu înseamnă un fenomen închis, petrecut într-o țărnire 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 împlântat rădăcinile este altul”.

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

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. Negoïțescu 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. Negoïțescu 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, Negoïțescu 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!”<sup>42</sup>.

In the fragment above, the meaning of “Romanian” is clearly that which Negoïțescu 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 Negoïțescu “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. Negoïțescu’s irony can be noticed once more:

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<sup>42</sup> I. Negoïțescu, 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 art<sup>43</sup>.

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. Negoïtescu 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"<sup>44</sup>.

The anti-rural confessions are not negligible in Negoïtescu'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 Negoïtescu refers to Liviu Rebreanu. In the chapter dedicated to the novelist in *Analize și sinteze* [*Analyzes and Syntheses*]<sup>45</sup>, 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

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<sup>43</sup> I. Negoïtescu, *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".

<sup>44</sup> I. Negoïtescu, *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".

<sup>45</sup> I. Negoïtescu, *Analize și sinteze* [*Analyzes and Syntheses*], București, Albatros, 1976, pp. 157-165.



significance of his approach”<sup>46</sup>. Gabriela Gavril also notes the more peculiar harshness of the way in which Rebreanu is treated in Negoïtescu’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”<sup>47</sup>. 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 involve<sup>48</sup>.

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 Negoïtescu’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 work<sup>49</sup>.

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<sup>46</sup> I. Negoïtescu, *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”.

<sup>47</sup> 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”.

<sup>48</sup> I. Negoïtescu, *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”.

<sup>49</sup> I. Negoïtescu, *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 Negoïtescu's critical arsenal. As stated by Ov. S. Crohmălniceanu: "His silences are therefore significant and eloquent in some cases"<sup>50</sup>. Certainly, one of the cases to which the exegete refers is that of Nicolae Labiș, who is absent from Negoïtescu's writings.

### *Ethical Irony*

The last avatar of I. Negoïtescu's irony is the ethical one, employed in relation to the historical reality. If during World War II, unlike the Albatross group, Negoïtescu 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 Negoïtescu'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 Ceaușescu, the author's interviews given abroad, the notes written during his

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<sup>50</sup> Ovid S. Crohmălniceanu, Klaus Heitmann, *Cercul literar de la Sibiu*, p. 286: "Tăcerile lui sunt astfel, în anumite cazuri semnificative și 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”<sup>51</sup>. 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. Negoïtescu'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. Negoïtescu. In *Culoarea curcubeului '77*, the fortifying encounter with the literary critic is a major event:

The arrival of the literary critic and historian Ion Negoïtescu 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 Negoïtescu in my house – for the first time<sup>52</sup>.

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

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<sup>51</sup> 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.

<sup>52</sup> 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 Negoïtescu 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 nescriitorii, 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 Negoïtescu în casa mea – pentru întâia oară”.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 176: “Între 14,30 – 18,10: Negoïtescu. 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)”<sup>54</sup>. 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 said<sup>55</sup>.

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?<sup>56</sup>

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

<sup>54</sup> *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)”.

<sup>55</sup> 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”.

<sup>56</sup> *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, Negoïtescu 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”<sup>57</sup>. After that moment, crucial in I. Negoïtescu’s biography, his discourse acquires an increasingly pronounced, politically engaged dimension. The exile years abound in political texts, characterizing the latter period of Negoïtescu’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 case<sup>58</sup>.

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 Negoïtescu’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. Negoïtescu’s ethical irony can be found in the volume subtitled *political texts*.

One by one, I. Negoïtescu’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*”], Negoïtescu 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”<sup>59</sup>. 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

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

<sup>58</sup> *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”.

<sup>59</sup> *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"<sup>60</sup>. Another example is the state of "diffidence", described by Negoïtescu not as the "opposite of the *dissident* but as its preparatory state. [...] We are not cowards, we are not afraid, we are just *diffidents*"<sup>61</sup>. In "Poezia politică în România de astăzi" ["Political Poetry in Today's Romania"], the irony of Negoïtescu 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 it<sup>62</sup>.

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 Negoïtescu'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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<sup>60</sup> *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".

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

<sup>62</sup> *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 10<sup>th</sup> of august 2021 marks the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Ion Negoïtescu's birth. During his stage in the Sibiu Literary Circle and in the literary activity that followed the separation of the group, Negoïtescu'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 Negoïtescu'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. Negoïtescu, 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 Negoïtescu. Atât în perioada sa cerchistă, cât și în activitatea literară de după, Negoïtescu 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. Negoïtescu se iau în calcul atât studiile sale de istorie literară, cât și paginile autobiografice, publicistica și activitatea sa epistolară.

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