

## ROMANIAN CULTURE BETWEEN EAST AND WEST

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### A New Cultural Programme: To Bring Europe "Home"

Romanian culture, more precisely, modern Romanian culture, commencing from the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century is the product of a rapid Western synchronisation. At the same time the basis of tradition and history in the late Middle Ages remains extremely robust. Hence a typical situation: at the junction of two cultural spheres without real affinities, modern Romanian culture contains the interference of ambiguities and possibly even inevitable conflicts. With a front towards the "West" and another toward "East" and "the Balkans", this fundamental contradiction - which represents the development of modern Romania - is currently defined, from Maiorescu on, through this acute conflict. We are or could be, fundamentally, a culture without substance - a definition possibly only true.

Some Western forms of culture have not really been assimilated yet. Empty initiatives can be seen at every turn - even today. Other Western forms have only been assimilated partially - imperfectly and superficially. Hence the inevitable interferences and hybrid products. Others have been completely assimilated, though only in limited, more or less elite circles. Anyway, the solution to these essential controversies, stated by E. Lovinescu, seems to be the most realistic and accurate: sooner or later, the new "forms" will generate their proper foundation. It is all a matter of progressive integration, of critical selection and especially of establishment and habit, therefore of time and stability. As long as the European system of values - and not only of cultural values - is continuously questioned, contested and even annulled by open and aggressive politics of isolation and of "getting out of Europe", our **real** (we underline this word) Westernisation and Europeanisation cannot ever take place.

As a result of this culture of confluence, the Romanian - and I am referring not only to the man of culture and the intellectual, but also to the common man-is “condemned” to be, or to become “Romanian” and “European” at the same time. Hence the questions like: are there in fact “two Romanias” ? Is our country condemned to be spiritually always torn in two or divided ? Is there no possibility of a synthesis, a reconciliation, a realistic and, at the same time, positive, formula ? Can we not join forces with the West and be part of Western assimilation, in an unqualified way ? Can we not offer yet the real foundations of some cultural “forms” and inevitable “imitations” ? Is it the Europeanisation and the personalization of Romanian culture mutually exclusive realities ? Or do they in fact cooperate, through convergences and real creative solutions ?

We think and firmly believe that the latter is possible. And what is more, our more or less recent cultural history has witnessed the beginning of a solution. There have been realistic “European” minds in our country too and works that could be defined as “European”. We firmly dismiss the conjecture that the lack of European traditions renders impossible our effective cultural Europeanisation. Nevertheless we are aware of all the recent alternatives and solutions of this “European” dilemma.

One of them, the most simple but often generalised, is to simply ignore the problem: “Europe is a false problem”. ”It does not exist” or “we are not interested in it. We feel fine here without Europe.” ”I do not want to hear about your Europe”. Polemic dialogues and radical solutions of this kind date back to Caragiale’s time. Fleeing or defecting to Europe is another contradictory solution. Go into exile, get yourself lost in Europe, increase the number of “Diaspora - individuals” ! Those who stay at home, full of resentment and complexes, despise “themselves” and “us” because we do not live in Europe and because we indeed are not Europeans. Few, very few, a small minority in fact - of which, dare we say, are part of - apply a radically different, reverse solution: to bring Europe “home”. To behave, to act, to work, to create possibly as Romanians, but in the spirit and according to European standards. This is the most difficult solution, but, at the same time, the only constructive one. Ideally speaking.

The Anti - European Theories: Nae Ionescu, Noica, Tutea

The attraction of Europe and its demands in terms of culture and civilization poses many difficulties for us. What matters most is that there is a whole anti - European ideology; we do not hesitate to call it “rightist”. This manifested itself between the two wars and during the communist - Ceaușescu period and it reappeared recently, energised. It has as its nucleus spirits of undeniable value. These are the mythical philosophers, philosophers - prophets, symbolic philosophers, mystic philosophers, even gurus of present day culture. They received their education before the 40s. Because of the lack of a powerful and active Romanian tradition of liberal, pluralistic, democratic, critical and rational thought, they were not only brought to the fore by the historical situation of the totalitarian repression, the events after 1989, but also by the anti - European ideology which has also started to dominate large areas of present - day culture. We are not emphasising the causes of this “success” or the immense mediation of a profoundly anti - European and, of course, antidemocratic and antipluralist ideology. However I am going to mention just a few champions of this ideology which we consider to be profoundly obsolete and even ill - fated concerning the European destiny of present - day Romanian culture. Whether these philosophers like it or not, Romania is after all in Europe; it is a European country. And it cannot isolate itself. It cannot wriggle out of the political, economic and also spiritual interdependencies of the actual world.

Let us see, for example, what Nae Ionescu, the most outspoken Romanian anti - European ideologist wrote in 1932. We quote from the original edition: *Wind Rose (Roza Vânturilor)*<sup>1</sup>. He called for our attention, “our decoupling from world politics; a closing, to the furthest extended (underlined in the text), within our borders; a taking into account of Romanian realities; a provisional subtraction of living standards to the level of this reality. These “theories”, if you want to call them this, are

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<sup>1</sup> Nae Ionescu, *Roza vânturilor* (“Wind Rose”), București, Cultura Națională, 1937, pp. 286 - 287.

profoundly conservative, not to say “reactionary”. So the ideal was: isolation, autarchy, a low level of living standards. In fact the core and the latter of ... “Ceaușism”.

Constantin Noica is profoundly anti - European too, especially in the political and moral sense, but also in spiritual terms. In addition he is also hostile to European manners and civilisation, although he has written a whole book about **The European Cultural Model**, which has recently been published<sup>2</sup>. The Foreword, *A Letter to A Western Intellectual*, seems to be stuck to it, written probably at the suggestion of the authorities, in order to ensure the book’s publication. Anyway, the tone, style and orientation are profoundly different. The text dates from 1987 and contains much of the clichés of the epoch (but also of the extreme right from 1930 - 1940), beginning with the alleged decadence and agony of Western civilisation. The latter - note again - hates the world; its characteristics are “absurdness, nonsense and cynicism”; it says “goodbye” to itself and to others (*The Bye - Bye Society*), also. A society that gives up, resigns itself for good and all. But this did not happen at all: it won World War II; it won the “cold war”, also.

What does one to say about the branding of the atomic bomb that has been used “ignorantly” (so it must not have been used against Japan!). Moreover, the West, that is, the United States, “wanted to frighten others too with it”. The Russians, that is ! Constantin Noica - defending the politics of the Soviets ! Who would have thought ? A well - known theme of the Soviet propaganda, anyway ... It is a fairly sad, not to say embarrassing text that takes again, in fact, all the attacks between the two world wars concerning the “agony of the West”. What does one say, again, about the anathema to “Europe, land of milk and honey” ? And this in a country and in an epoch in which food was rationed and people were starving ! The detachment from reality - please note our perpetual use of euphemisms - was complete. And the breaking - off (we cannot find a better word for it) with the European “Faustian” spirit ? The philosopher congratulates himself on “our non - Faustian spiritual condition”. But what

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<sup>2</sup> Constantin Noica, *Modelul cultural european* (“The European Cultural Model”), București, Humanitas, 1993.

does it mean to be “Faustian” in Constantin Noica’s opinion” ? “It is the thirst for knowledge, by all means, and the power struggle again”<sup>3</sup>. But we ask ourselves if to be “non - Faustian” is really a good reason to be so satisfied with ourselves. And, anyway, do the advantages of the Faustian spirit invented by “Spengler’s embarrassing cultural determinism” surpass the disadvantages of its lack ? Otherwise, the whole book is based on a fundamental contradiction: if the European model is the paradigm of the whole world (Constantin Noica’s Eurocentrism is obvious and completely erroneous), then the Faustian spirit is, anyway, efficient and it has an immense power of expansion. Its superiority has been proven. Historically at least.

Finally, let us remember another prophet of our days: Petre Țuțea. As is well known, he is the Socrates of Romania. The second one, after Nae Ionescu.

But how can one reiterate clearly Ceaușist formulă repeated in dozens of speeches, word by word ? What are then sovereignty and complete national independence in Petre Țuțea’s opinion ? I quote: “Equality before the law, non - interference in internal affairs, mutual advantage, peaceful and multi - sided collaboration with all nations, irrespective of their social and governmental system. Finally, the right to make its own history”<sup>4</sup>. So, to conclude, Europe does not have the right to interfere in ... our internal affairs, neither via the League of Human Rights nor by the Commission of the European Community (which we try to enter after all). Not to speak about F. M. I., B. E. R. D. and other international political and financial institutions.

We know that these texts have been written in another epoch and in a quite a different context. However, bringing them up-to-date with great veneration and to speak ecstatically about “Saint Petre Țuțea” means to give up any critical spirit, historical consciousness, any sense of the actual international Western, but also Eastern realities (as though Elțin wouldn’t have won a pro-”European” reform referendum, among others). To be not

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<sup>3</sup> Revista de Istorie și Teorie Literară 3 - 4/1987, p. 9.

<sup>4</sup> Petre Țuțea, Proiectul de tratat. Eros (“Treaty Project. Eros”, Brașov-Chișinău, 1992, p. 46.

only “non-Europeans”, but simply fanatic, naive anti - Europeans. We rest here, for we do not want to turn this discussion into pure politics. It is more interesting and illuminating, from our point of view, to have a look at the origins of this strange and obsolete mentality. And to ask ourselves what can be used against it, effectively and in a constructive way, in the domain of culture.

### Between the Western and Eastern Complex

Situated between East and West, Romanian culture is dominated, from the latter century onwards, by two big complexes: the Western and the Eastern one. Both of them are twofold, like silk. They are at the same time complexes of superiority and of inferiority. We quickly add, that Romanian culture will reach maturity, equilibrium and inner calm only when it will surpass both complexes. This was named in a former book, *European Notebooks*<sup>5</sup> the “Dinicu Golescu complex”. This term has become part of journalist folklore and is today without paternity. It does not bother us, on the contrary, we are quite pleased by this little “success”. So let us get rid of our complexes, first of those Western and Westernizer ones. There are many of them. Most important is, perhaps, the one that dominates Romanian culture, the Western canon’s complex. There is a kind of moderate “revolt” against it. Western culture would be canonical, paradigmatic, symbolic for the whole world - culture, beginning with the Eastern one. We have already protested against this Eurocentrism in a previous book, written and published only in French, practically unknown in our country, a sealed book. We discussed and rejected “Eurocentrism” under the pretext of comparative literature, the only possible alibi at that time<sup>6</sup>.

In addition, we spurned Western cultural centres’ absolute domination, as well as the definition and criteria of judging literature prescribed by these exclusive centres.

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<sup>5</sup> Adrian Marino, *Carnete Europene* (“European Notebooks”), București, 1976.

<sup>6</sup> Idem, *Etiemble on le comparatisme militant*, Paris, Gallimard, 1982.

Subsequently, a whole anti - canonical dispute has been unleashed in the United States. Virgil Nemoianu, our fellow countryman took part in it too. His article, *The Canonical Battle - From American Criticism to Romanian Culture*<sup>7</sup>, contains a summary of the whole problem. Indeed, why should French literature - more precisely, the one from the 6<sup>th</sup> arondissement of Paris - be our final and absolute model ? Why should Roland Barthes be the model of Romanian criticism ? G. Călinescu recently asked himself the same question. The actual cultural centres are not exclusively Francophil at all. None of them dominates the others. And all of them reach an equilibrium some time. And we can borrow, imitate and emulate especially what suits us. From anywhere. Without any inhibition. Policentrism can therefore better stimulate the game and creativity of elective affinities. We fit in, culturally speaking, where we have the possibility of a better and more fecund creative acumulation of our virtualities.

The Eastern complex, on the contrary, exalts originality: a typical example; the mania of being Thracians. The review *We Thracians* (Noi Tracii) says that we, “we Thracians” are the ancestors of European culture, and many other aberrations. Isolation and underdevelopment are, in fact, good qualities, as they preserve our authenticity and originality. On the level of politics there is the perpetual victimisation (beginning with “being at the mercy of all mishaps”, as chronicles have it, to the denunciation of the spheres of influence from Yalta and Malta), the abandonment by the West; the profound disappointment that the “Americans did not come” has been lived through by our epoch, in prison as well. Constantin Noica speaks in similar terms about “the feelings of the brother who is ignored like all of us here”<sup>8</sup>. Hence other typical Romanian gestures are intensified and made worse in the epoch of “the glorious years”, the Ceaușist epoch: to escape to West or at least to “leave” officially, to be quoted and presented - if you were a writer - by *Free Europe*. How many have tried to obtain “literary transmission” or to hold the strings. Or, the literary ideal of

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<sup>7</sup> Virgil Nemoianu, *Bătălia canonică - de la critica americană la cultura română*, in *România literară*, nr. 41/11 October 1990.

<sup>8</sup> Constantin Noica, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

the same epoch, to be quoted anywhere, no matter when and how, in a foreign publication (the myth of the Romanian presence”) also. Unfortunately, the Romanian cultural conscience has not yet reached its necessary, creative inner calm and the equilibrium between isolation and escape, between vain, chauvinist nationalism, exacerbated nationalist rage and docile, even a humble imitation of the West, knocking on the doors of the Western part of the continent.

The psychology of Western seduction, of emigration and even of running away regardless, has reached the deep strata of the population. We have even a recent personal experience that is quite significant. Coming back in the autumn, last year, from abroad, a clerk from a post - office cried out in astonishment: “You’ve come back ? Why did you come back?” It is a sad situation; we will not analyse the causes underlying it. We just say that both the “governments” before the 22<sup>nd</sup> December and those after are to be blamed. Not to mention well - known politicians.

### To Be Romanian and European at the Same Time

Faced with this precarious, often oppressive, at least dominant mentality, the only recommended cultural formula is, in our opinion, to be, to want to be, to act and to remain - we cannot help repeating - Romanian and European at the same time. In other words, to think, to behave, to manifest ourselves, culturally speaking, as “Europeans”, remaining nevertheless “Romanians”, too. To have therefore this active double conscience. To try to reconcile, to harmonise and to realise it, step by step, in a superior synthesis. That means, first of all, to stay in Romania and produce culture here. But without complexes - of any kind. To produce culture in a natural way, organically, all risks included.

He who circulates in “Europe” and does not get “frightened” of anything, who is neither humble, nor arrogant, neither too admiring, nor always sullen, neither superficially cosmopolitan, nor chauvinist, belongs to a superior category capable of a great qualitative change. We do not have any statistics. But we have met some such Romanian persons of culture. Not too many, unfortunately. But we know some. And they gave us hope. Let us propose ourselves another cultural future therefore.



To define the most concise way possible, and in a synthesis - firmly refusing any nationalism, protochronism or any Eurocentrism - the basic cultural objective should be the following: to bring Europe home, which is in an apparently paradoxical way tantamount to entering Europe. But holding onto our personality. Let us therefore apply our own method of integration, recovery and development. Let us wholly reveal our European vocation, coming out of isolation, but not at random, in a careless and improvised manner. In other words, not by superficial, mechanical imitations, by hurried synchronizations, but by efforts of personality and originality. We do not believe at all in nationalistic values, but we firmly believe in personalised and original values, that is, in Romanian creations that should reveal an obvious originality which is, therefore, unique. What we want is to produce as many real and authentic creations as possible. They would then be "specific" too, taking into account that "national specificity" is, at the same time, an organic, evolutionary process.

In a word, we do not want an empty structure, imitated culture, exposed forever to European cultural trends. Similarly, the concept of an ethnic, isolated, often chauvinist and intolerant culture is far, very far removed from us. Our ideal is a synthesis of constructive Western influences and of our own, local and original initiatives, which can materialise in competitive works, capable of becoming parts of a real, unconventional, unofficial cultural dialogue, one without any complexes. That is, we need Romanian works of international significance and value. We admit, of course, the superiority of Western culture. Nevertheless, let us not acquiesce, but have in mind to reduce this discrepancy and to make up for lost time. Let's not level synchronically, mechanically, but through works of the highest "European" level, obliterating, in a way, many stages. This is the core of the problem in our opinion. It is the leap from "minor" Romanian culture to "major" Romanian culture.

The difficulties - we make no secret of it - are, on the other hand, enormous. Can the actual Romanian culture's main orientations effectively face European competition and emulation? Does a predominantly poetic and journalistic culture, that is, a culture of fragments and "plagiarism" have a real chance of asserting itself? We do not think so. There is a cultural crisis of structure: the lack of synthesis, of great Romanian works

in reference, of great reference points capable of informing Romanians and foreigners alike about the original, basic features of Romanian history and culture.

At the same time, individual efforts are not enough. Joint efforts are necessary. We need a real political structure and cultural diffusion abroad inclusively. We ourselves have accumulated and achieved some results, a little experience in the field of literary studies. But, of course, there are other, purely technical problems. Finally, an official propaganda of Ceaușescan politics of culture has absolutely no chance in contemporary cultural Europe and its standards of reception.