

Under the Zodiac Sign of the Alternative An Aest(ethic)al Alternative Model

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Abstract

Adrian Marino's life and scientific activity seems to have been marked by the zodiac sign of the alternative. He elaborated a challenging encyclopaedic construction dealing with the notion of literature (*The Hermeneutics of the Idea of Literature, The Biography of the Idea of Literature, The Dictionary of Literary Ideas*) and adopted an alternative method for the study of comparative literature. Being an adept of alternatives and relativistic thinking, he defied the uniformity and authoritarian character of the communist regime and managed to become an independently thinking professional.

Though a great scholar, Marino considered important not to neglect activity for the sake of theory: he endeavoured to reconcile culture and politics trying to reform both and emphasizing their complementarity. His oeuvre had both a militant and a utopian aspect.

His works, outlining a pro-European and pro-democratic system of values, made him a true citizen of the Republic of Letters of his age.

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In the course of time we have become accustomed to regard Adrian Marino as a devotee of far-reaching critical projects. Methodically built on the basis of theoretical hypotheses solid as ferro-concrete, and finalized with an enviable effectiveness, these projects seemed to contradict the ethnic fatality of *the abandoned, unfinished wall*.¹ The

¹ Allusion to the Romanian folk poem, *Monastirea Argeşului* (The Monastery on the Argeş River) narrating the story of the architect Manole, the builder of the monastery who had to sacrifice his wife walling her into the church in order to finish the beautiful building on a place where an unfinished and abandoned wall stood before. (Translator's note.)

hermeneutist strived to accomplish a challenging encyclopaedic construction comprising various fields and dealing with the nebulous notion currently called by us *literature* and with its dynamics in European culture [*Hermeneutica ideii de literatură* (The Hermeneutics of the Idea of Literature), *Biografia ideii de literatură I-VI* (The Biography of the Idea of Literature I-VI), *Dicționar de idei literare* (The Dictionary of Literary Ideas)]. Drawing into its gravitational field a sequence of independent studies with different atmosphere, the monograph on Etiemble (*Etiemble et le comparatisme militant*), contributed to the reanimation of comparative literature studies in a moment when this discipline was emerging with difficulty from a long lethargic period. Finally, he elaborated a massive synthesis focusing on Mircea Eliade [*Hermeneutica lui Mircea Eliade* (Mircea Eliade's Hermeneutics)]. This gathers the heteroclitic intellectual data about a protean and controversial character in a convincing case study.

In parallel with the daily work on large 'academic building sites', during the era of communist dictatorship, Adrian Marino published – under the frivolous disguise of some journey-notes – fragments from what seemed to be a systematic subterranean meditation on the condition of culture in the present world. After 1990, two revelatory volumes confirmed such a supposition, displaying the missing details of the *figure on the carpet*. They completed the perspective by contextualizing the ideas of the man of letters Adrian Marino, adding to it an explicit intellectual credo.

Seen globally and retrospectively, Adrian Marino's writings emphasize the basic options of a critic, for whom the ultimate aim of literature is always *beyond* literature itself in the cultural and the ideological. From a more general point of view, the convergent orientation of Adrian Marino's cultural heritage is striking. The way in which this heritage was devised and formulated illustrates alike a model of the *Alternative*. I mean that in Marino's system of values, the alternative way became the legitimizing principle.

One of the most dangerous consequences of the totalitarian conception is that the power must always have the last and decisive word in all domains. According to Adrian Marino, *relativistic thinking*, *alternatives* and *dilemmas* are among the most dangerous adversaries of the totalitarian spirit. The intellectual's natural opposition to the terror gains the aspect of tenacious action, beginning with alternative options to the canons and the norms in use; not a sterile, disintegrating refusal, but an edifying solution which changes opposition to deeds.

What else is, basically, the criticism of the idea of literature, the way in which the author of the *Hermeneutics* and the *Biography* projected it? Let us admit that in the beginning even the severest literary theoreticians might have considered the view of this work eccentric. It was persistently pleading for heretic hypotheses and was justifying unacceptable reforms.

Its aim was to make us admit, for example, that the *literal* has an original ascendancy over the *literary*. To make us find comfort in the idea that the aesthetic is only an accidental and late aspect of literariness. To make us consider the most daring campaigns for the renewal of creation through belligerency a simple selective actualization of the virtualities already inventoried in the genetic matrix of the notion of literature. Finally, as if all these did not suffice, it would make us admit that our everyday literature is not the privileged chapter of culture. And where the situation seems to be like this, we plunge into the pathologic; more precisely, into the disease – endemic to our culture – of abusive literarization of some autonomous neighbouring domains.

If we change perspective turning to the field of comparative, literature, we shall discover the same paradigm of the alternative. Adrian Marino was among those who insistently proposed a radical reform in this domain. His counter-offer suggested the replacement of the short-sighted traditional positivism with a theory-centred orientation with nominalistic nuances. This would mean to abandon the hunt for influences and instead to identify the universals, the recurrences, the speculative topoi with intensive circulation. Therefore he supported here an ecumenism able to overturn the meaning of the frustrating polarity *central/peripheral* and to transform culture into a market of values with free circulation in any direction.

We could continue to enumerate the domains placed by the intellectual Adrian Marino under the *Zodiac Sign of the Alternative*. It would eventually extend from the direction of culture towards life.

Even Adrian Marino's – now definitively rounded – biography opposed the universe of communist concentration camps, and did not allow itself to be assimilated by it. The former inhabitant of the autochthon Gulag, who after detention received a bounty of house arrest in Bărăgan, found a way of defying the official path that should have been followed. Adrian Marino made a career as a professional, in the strictest literal meaning of the word.

It is to be noted, however, that the advocate of the alternative did not lose sight of the inherent risks: "Since we did not intend to offer an

idyllic picture of the aspects of the actual Romanian culture, we do not in the least mean to idealize the alternative culture – declared the author at a given moment. Its original vice or sin is ambiguity.”

The above mentioned danger is rooted in the synonymy between the principle of the alternative and a concept which can be and is manipulated – through its nature – in opposite directions: the absolute theoretical and practical freedom. In the communist society, but unfortunately also in the Western consumer democracies the principle of liberty was sometimes skilfully manoeuvred to the point when people turned against it. What is more, protests always have a double edge, as they can be retrieved, moderated, reduced to stereotypes, to clichés and – why not? – they can be transformed into saleable goods. (I would add that no one understood this mechanism better than a theoretician of the avant-garde such as Adrian Marino.)

Another constant of Adrian Marino’s system of thinking was the equation postulated between the *cultural* and the *political*. Continuing for a moment the former order of ideas, it can be said that the alternative “Culture or Politics?” (obsessive in our culture) is replaced by an alternative complementarity between the cultural and the political. Moreover, it requires a concerted reform of both terms.

In Adrian Marino’s opinion the reinvention of Romanian liberal democracy would be the number one political problem. In this respect the intellectual from Cluj had an exhaustive programme within his reach. I am going to stop only at some of his important results. Among these, the normalization of the political vocabulary, firstly through the rehabilitation of certain terms, demonized by communism, such as bourgeoisie, middle class, private property, capitalism, privatization, free market, stock-market, bankruptcy, etc. (Political semantics is an indispensable instrument for diagnosing the state of facts everywhere in the world. In France, for example, *The Structure of the Political Vocabulary* is being published for each decade, in order to take the ideological temperature of the moment). It is also to be noted that the reform suggested by Adrian Marino in the 90’s, referred not only to the discourse of power, but equally that of the opposition as well. Maybe this latter one in the first place, as it was still timorous, hesitating, and marked by taboos. As ever, verbal stereotypes betray automatisms of thinking: in the case of one wing the statist mirage, the myth of egalitarianism, the Hegelian-Marxist hypothesis of the so called conformity to law (“zakonomernost”) of communism etc; in the case of the other wing, the

small influence on reality, marked by the older generation's inopportune nostalgias as well as their stiff and vain rigorism.

In Adrian Marino's view, in order to become truly effective, the political life should be based on balance and upon a perfect cooperation between idea and action, between the abstract speculation and the particular act. The dramatic incompatibility postulated – because of different, not always innocent, reasons – between culture and politics can be rescinded by elevating abstraction to the level of action in both spheres. Thus culture can become a guide and an instrument of politics, and *to know* an aspect of *to do*.

Here we discover the moulding connection, which explains the options of a hermeneutist, comparatist, critic, political essayist, in a word of an intellectual such as Adrian Marino. His faith in the pragmatic dignity of theory constrained idealism and militancy to cooperation. In his books the productive fusion and confusion between the logic of the manifesto and of utopia is always striking.

At first sight the militant side is perhaps more obvious than the other, and it is occasionally indicated by emphatic signs. Let us remember the militant epithet attributed to Mircea Eliade's hermeneutics and Etiemble's studies in comparative literature; or the programme of cultural action hardly hidden in the critique of the notion of literature and in the narration of its biography. He manifests himself impetuously only in the volumes of the *Biography* published after 1990 – especially in the volume demystifying the so called Marxist aesthetics. One of his essay volumes is called *Pentru Europa* (For Europe). The subtitle of the other is *Pentru o nouă cultură română* (For a New Romanian Culture).

In comparison with its militancy, the utopian line of Adrian Marino's work somehow remains hidden. Though – I only confess it now – when I first learned about the project of an analysis of the idea of literature elaborated thrice (*Hermeneutics; Biography; Dictionary*) I found it very enthusiastic and... quixotic. Adrian Marino's essay, *Don Quijote a greșit adresa* (Don Quixote missed the address) is revelatory in this sense. It starts out from a book by Octavian Paler and tries to explain the triumph of Mitică over Don Quixote in the Carpathian-Danubian-Pontic space.

In short, utopia represents for Adrian Marino the invigorating belief in the active force of ideas and even that of the illusion: and this in any domain from politics to literary theory or inversely. How would the utopian fortress – Adrian Marino had undoubtedly been dreaming about – actually look like? Politically and socially it would be a stable Romania,

based on a vigorous capitalist economy and on an enterprising bourgeoisie, where the active intellectual personalities with civic vocation are to be found in a modern party: urban, resolutely pro-democratic and pro-European, with an economical conception free of any leftism. The intellectual-ideological illusions will be abandoned only then. "Utopia? Complete historical visionarism with a liberal character? Or reverie, however, in the sense of history?" – put the rhetorical question the author himself.

In their spiritual version the reveries of Adrian Marino materialize in a *sui generis* Republic of Letters. Originating from the antiquity, having a great career during the Enlightenment, this expression metaphorically denotes a community and solidarity of scholars from all over the world, symptomatically qualified by Adrian Marino as: "spiritual, brotherly, strong, independent, critical and militant, capable of determining currents of opinions, scales of value and international cultural reputations." Adrian Marino has always been sufficiently close to and distanced from the objects he explored, so that the clear evaluation of Romanian culture that he constantly and tenaciously projected proved to have profound affective and moral implications.

Seen in the horizon of the *longue durée*, the intellectual from Cluj, who has recently passed away, left behind a lifework which undeniably confirms his status as a distinguished innate citizen of the *Republic of Letters*.