

DRAWBACKS AND ALTERNATIVES IN LITERARY HISTORY. THE POST-WAR ROMANIAN CASE

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Abstract The present paper intends to discuss the issue of an “internal” literary history and the debate upon this topic in post-war Romanian literary criticism. We shall analyse the methodological influence and solutions suggested by structuralism or stylistics in critics’ attempts, starting with the 1970s, to remap Romanian literary history in terms of larger typologies or genres. On the other hand, we shall discuss the features of the Romanian critical environment which trigger the synchronic approaches, and their re-evaluating consequences in the local literature.

Keywords structuralism, historicism, stylistics, aesthetic autonomy, sociology

After the successive waves of post-structuralism, New Historicism or cultural studies have mined the purist assumptions of literature, last decades’ Western projects of literary history often found it difficult to focus their object of research. The idea of literature as monument, as canonical edifice and organic corpus of works fell under various contextualist approaches, which shifted from a history of literature to histories of culture, institutions or ideologies.¹ This new cultural broadening marks the resurgence of historicism in literary studies, which came back in full force after being marginalised by the 1960s-1970s structuralism. When compared to the contemporary debate in the Western world, Nicolae Manolescu’s 2008 *Critical History of Romanian Literature*² seems to stem from an older epistemological age, given its canonical and strictly aesthetic aims, but also in terms of its method, which the author envisions as a history of literary forms.

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¹ *The History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe: Junctions and Disjunctions in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, ed. Marcel Cornis-Pope, John Neubauer, Vol. 1–2 (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2004, 2005).

² Nicolae Manolescu, *Istoria critică a literaturii române: 5 secole de literatură* (Critical history of Romanian literature. 5 centuries of literature) (Pitești: Paralela 45, 2008).

Actually, in a normal succession of critical paradigms, and if the nationalist-communist climate had not blocked many intellectual initiatives, this type of history should have normally appeared at least two decades earlier. It is true, in fact, that the most substantial part of Manolescu's *History* was indeed written prior to 1989: afterwards, several circumstances made the critic lose much of his prior vitality and interest for contemporary literature, and even more so his concern with post-1990 international critical movements. In terms of conception, valorization, but also critical energy, the volume is mainly a product of the period between 1964 and 1989, although two more decades had passed until its publication. Although delayed, Manolescu's edifice still remains the stateliest and most influential enterprise after G. Călinescu's *History*. On the one hand, Romanian literary criticism went through its most prolific phase during the national-communist age, but was unable to provide, during that time, a literary history of major scope and credibility. On the other hand, the same age created the circumstances for a formal approach in literary history, which could have fused the premises of then-fashionable structuralism with the aesthetic autonomy principles of local criticism and its attempts to recoil from political pressure. So what were, then, Romanian criticism's prospects to elaborate a history of literary forms during national communism?

Several local critics blame structuralism and its lasting impact until the late 1980s for the decrease of interest in literary history. One cannot deny that structuralism does indeed seem to be in profound disagreement with historicism, or even in pure denial of history. It is true that, as early as 1960, Roland Barthes reshaped the problem of literary history – which French academic positivism had limited to a mere biographical practice – by shifting the focus from the “writer” to the “literary institution” and its functions (of production, dissemination and consumption).³ At the same time, in 1966, Gérard Genette envisioned a historiographic reform on formalist premises: “Conceived as such, literary history becomes the history of a system: it thus follows not the evolution of elements, but of the system functions; the study of synchronic relations must precede the study of processes”.⁴ But these were only sketches that were never put into practice. French structuralism and its European spectre did not renew literary history, but banished it on a secondary line of evolution, promoting instead the domain of general poetics. In this respect, in the afterword of his *History*, Nicolae Manolescu is right to consider the “Romanian intellectuals’” great fascination with French structuralism as a major reason for the delay of a new literary history long after G. Călinescu. However, his blame is only half legitimate, as Manolescu himself derived fertile critical

³ Roland Barthes, “Histoire et littérature: à propos de Racine”, *Annales. Économies, Sociétés, Civilisations* 15. 3 (1960): 524–537, <http://www.persee.fr/collection/ahess>. Accessed on 13 December 2016.

⁴ Gérard Genette, *Figures, II* (Paris: Seuil, 1966), 168.

consequences from narratology and formalism in his 1976 exegesis of Sadoveanu or the essays on the Romanian novel and poetry published in the 1980s.

Romanian criticism between 1948 and 1989 could not provide any literary history even remotely comparable to Călinescu's masterwork. This does not mean, however, that all historiographic interests vanished during this age. In fact, from the beginning of the 1970s, Romanian critics showed growing interest in literary syntheses about genres, trends and bigger literary forms, all influenced by structuralist methods and concepts. If Romanian criticism of that age was indeed still reluctant towards historicism, that very reluctance was the one to trigger the vogue of structuralism, rather than being triggered by the latter. The dogmatic approach of the 1950s' socialist realism determined Romanian criticism to be cautious with traditional historiography in general and delayed its renewal in line of mentalities or reception (a process that was expected to happen at least in the 1990s). The 1950s' socialist realism exerted a traumatic and lasting impact upon Romanian critical thinking and made it develop reflex precautions towards ideology. Political restrictions still weighing on certain writers or on certain literary ages hindered the approach of Romanian literature "from its origins to the present, as a completely unitary text", ⁵ and also hindered the logical distinction between the normal limits of literary historiography and its former dogmatic excesses. For Romanian post-war criticism, historicism was delegitimised not by positivism, but by ideological dogmatism.

In addition to that, the increasing prestige of minor critical genres like journal reviews or essays entertained the habit of text analysis and a "deprecating climate"⁶ towards history or sociology. Last but not least, Călinescu's views on the fusion of criticism and literary history were highly influential after 1964 and further minimised the relevance of determinist approaches, relegating the study of literary sources and influences outside the major concerns of the literary historian.⁷ (Of course, historicism should not be confused with determinism: however, the lack of both leads to a purely immanent approach). In conclusion, historiographic research in post-war Romanian criticism found it hard to develop a new and dogma-free conception of history. No wonder that contextualist approaches upon literary history were usually restricted to ages of cultural syncretism (the old age, the pre-modern age, the first decades of the 19th century), whose literature could not be understood without considering its institutions or the public (such aspects are approached in complex analyses by Paul Cornea, Mircea Anghelescu, Doina Curticăpeanu, etc.).

⁵ Mihai Zamfir, "Istoriografia literară în faza sintezelor" (Literary historiography in the syntheses phase), in Idem, *Istoriografia literară românească: 1944–1984* (Romanian literary historiography: 1944–1984) (Bucharest: Minerva, 1984), 135.

⁶ Paul Cornea, *Semnele vremii* (The signs of time) (Bucharest: Eminescu, 1995), 266.

⁷ Andrei Terian, *G. Călinescu. A cincea esență* (G. Călinescu. The fifth essence) (Bucharest: Cartea Românească, 2009), 265–266.

But besides those special ages, Romanian critics' perspective upon literary history did not refine on the whole, but rather in terms of particulars. Canonical writers were reinterpreted, often in an innovative manner. But critics tended to read them in isolation and seemed to avoid taking a holistic vantage point, as the idea of literary historicity was still tainted by the dogmatic precedent. One of the very few attempts to formulate a new point of view in the field belongs to Tudor Vianu.⁸ In 1962, just before the age of cultural liberalization, Vianu suggested the necessity to replace the ideological and content-oriented historiographic approaches that had been dominant in the past decade. In terms reminding of Leo Spitzer, Vianu pleads for stylistics as "a domain where history of language meets history of literature". He thus tries to place literary history within the more secure and ideology-free frame of linguistics, an extremely significant attempt in an age that was on the verge of waking up from the dogmatic sleep. Vianu is, however, quick to add that "we can explain literary facts by purely internal factors only to a certain extent". Moreover, he places the comparative approach at the highest level of synthesis, based on the anthropological unity of the imaginary. Vianu would have too little time left to develop his projects, before his death. Even so, his entire work and activity following the 1941 *Art of Romanian Prose-writers* would inspire a lasting movement of interplay between literary and linguistic studies, a formalist direction of literary analysis, and literary history's orientation towards stylistics and poetics. Although beneficial at first, because it helped de-ideologise literature, this orientation proved rather narrowing in the long run. Linguistics and, generally, formalism, may indeed revive textual exegesis, but could not provide the ground for a renewed historical perspective.

One of the domains that stimulated, especially in the academic environment, this formal direction of criticism was the history of language. Set in 1948, following the lead of the Soviet Union, the history of language would steadily focus within next decades exclusively on the literary language and on stylistic approaches of Romanian canonical writers. On the one hand, the writers' language was pondered up to its last adjective, in numerous studies promptly assimilated within school curricula. On the other hand, several literary critics also resorted, from the 1970s, to formalist-linguistic methods, in an attempt to part with the journalistic tradition of post-war local criticism. With arguments and instruments derived from contemporary narratology, formalism or structuralism, these critics investigate, from their very debut, problems of literary history. Eugen Negrici, for example, ignores the cultural environment and analyses old literature works strictly through their linguistic

⁸ Tudor Vianu, "Metoda de cercetare în istoria literară" (Research method in literary history), in *Conceptul de istorie literară în cultura românească* (The concept of literary history in Romanian culture), ed. Paul Cornea (Bucharest: Eminescu, 1978).

texture;⁹ the critic uses linguistic terms even regarding the issue of literary “expression”. Although he deals with embryonic literary genres, Negrici is not interested in assuming a historical perspective and assessing old genres from the perspective of their later evolution. Mihai Zamfir is even more at odds with historicism, which he considers “unquestionably failed”.¹⁰ In his opinion, literary history should shift its focus from author to stylistic form(ula), and completely replace the study of causes with stylistic exegesis.¹¹ Moreover, Al. Călinescu uses a part of Caragiale’s work¹² to explain the typological mutation in Romanian literary modernity in terms of the canonization of lower genres: a perfectly legitimate theoretical hypothesis, but by no means specific (only) to Romanian literature.

Anyway, these are just some examples of formalist approaches to parts of Romanian literary history. These attempts never congeal in an overarching map, a fact which definitely has to do with the symbolic division of labour within Romanian criticism. At least during the first years of the cultural liberalization, journalistic criticism and its VIP-s deal with contemporary literature, trying to select its emerging values and make a case for their aesthetic autonomy. These aims are reached through the confined, but strongly persuasive formula of reviews or critical essay. After 1964, Romanian literature has been dominated by lyricism, sentimentality or existential dramas, to which formalist instruments of analysis would have been rather inappropriate. Moreover, “formalist”-oriented critics of the 1970s deal with the literary past, with pre-literary forms or even foreign literatures, as Livius Ciocârlie or Mihai Zamfir do.¹³ These critics even extrapolate structuralist theories upon the whole of certain literatures (French, respectively Portuguese), which, by being foreign, are more approachable in terms of a methodological experiment.

In any case, the growing impact of formalism in the literary history of the 1970s can also be illustrated by Marxist- indebted critics. In his 1973 *For a Theory of Literary History*, Savin Bratu tries to reconcile rhetoric with sociology, the study of forms with the study of contexts and literary institutions. A formerly dogmatic critic, Bratu is somehow distressed both by its past and its present, and this conflict makes

⁹ Eugen Negrici, *Narațiunea în cronicile lui Grigore Ureche și Miron Costin* (Narration in the chronicles of Grigore Ureche and Miron Costin) (Bucharest: Minerva, 1972).

¹⁰ Mihai Zamfir, *Formele liricii portugheze* (The forms of Portuguese poetry) (Bucharest: Univers, 1985), 19.

¹¹ See also Mihai Zamfir, *Introducere în opera lui Al. Macedonski* (Introduction to Al. Macedonski’s work) (Bucharest: Minerva, 1972); Mihai Zamfir, *Poemul românesc în proză* (The Romanian poem in prose) (Bucharest: Minerva, 1981).

¹² Al. Călinescu, *Caragiale sau vârsta modernă a literaturii* (Caragiale, or the modern age of literature) (Bucharest: Albatros, 1976).

¹³ Livius Ciocârlie, *Realism și devenire poetică în literatura franceză* (Realism and poetic development in French literature) (Timișoara: Facla, 1974); Mihai Zamfir, *Formele liricii portugheze*.

him unable to decide between the two types of approach: "we should preferably lead two parallel, specialised studies, instead of mixing them in a single history of literature".¹⁴ On several occasions, Ion Vlad also tries to bridge the linguistic-stylistic methods and the sociological perspective.¹⁵ Most often, the author states the issue in vague, didactic terms, so he comes no closer than Bratu to finding the properly balanced line of research. Both examples prove, however, that the idea of connecting linguistics and sociology is a common topic, indicating at least the attempt to upgrade the latter notion, mined by political connotations for so long.

All in all, we see that the opportunity of formal methods in literary history is entertained even by critics structurally adverse to formalism. This is the consequence of the contemporary vogue of structuralism and of French *nouvelle critique*, which spread a wave of concepts within our academic and critical milieux. But besides this general climate and superficial circulation of concepts, were Romanian critics actually willing to write a formalist-oriented literary history? Adrian Marino, for example, is a critic with certain features recommending him for such an enterprise¹⁶ (which he himself seems to advocate in several articles). For a while indeed, Marino shows interest in formal methods; however, he ultimately goes in hermeneutic, documentary, comparatist directions, which are the farthest possible from the formalist approach.

Furthermore, literary research of the 1970s seems to show, on the whole, a general evolution towards a formal synthesis. If traditional monographs of authors dominated the critical field of the 1960s, the 1970s display another exegetic practice, a sort of transversal monograph, dealing with certain literary categories and often testing the applicability of a theoretical model. This case is illustrated by several critics: Nicolae Manolescu in his analysis of the stylistic registers of Sadoveanu's prose,¹⁷ Mihai Zamfir in his study of Macedonski's poetic conventions, Al. Călinescu in his attempt to trace the linguistic formulae of Caragiale's sketches, or

¹⁴ Savin Bratu, *Ipoteze și ipostaze. Pentru o teorie a istoriei literare* (Hypotheses and hypostases. For a theory of literary history) (Bucharest: Minerva, 1973), 67.

¹⁵ Ion Vlad, *Descoperirea operei. Comentarii de teorie literară* (Discovering the literary work. Literary theory commentaries) (Cluj: Dacia, 1970), 14; Ion Vlad, *Lecturi constructive* (Constructive readings) (Bucharest: Cartea Românească, 1975), 56.

¹⁶ "The problem of structure has the highest relevance for the elaboration of literary history, aesthetics and history of styles, for the study of genres and literary categories, and it could ground an actual literary «rhetoric». (...) All that is universal and constant in literary history cannot be but structural": Adrian Marino. "'Cheia' structurii literare", *Cronica* 35 (31 August 1968).

¹⁷ Nicolae Manolescu, *Sadoveanu sau utopia cărții* (Sadoveanu, or the book utopia) (Bucharest: Eminescu, 1976).

Marin Mincu in his essay upon textuality in Barbu's poetry.¹⁸ Such critical exercises prove that the traditional study of an author can be replaced by the study of the typologies he exemplifies. Most monographs of the 1970s resort to a "trans-documentary approach"¹⁹ and deal with intrinsic literary types, leaving out biographical aspects.

The same decade multiplies the prospects of a typological literary history by the publication of numerous studies of literary trends and movements (avant-garde, Expressionism, pre-Romanticism, Romanticism). The trend is a milestone of literary history because, more than the age or the period, it implies "the correlation between system and history, between synchrony and diachrony".²⁰ Besides studies dedicated to one single literary trend, monographs of literary genres are also published in the 70s: Ioana Em. Petrescu's book about comical epic, Ion Vlad's - about the tale, Mihai Zamfir's - about the prose poem, later, Nicolae Manolescu's essay about the novel. Here we have enough ground to build a history of literary forms: Romanian literature has been remapped in terms of genres and trends, the theoretical climate is indebted to structuralism, the entire Romanian criticism tends to focus on pure, intrinsic literary types. Nevertheless, all these favourable premises do not build up to a unitary literary history. Romanian criticism of the national-communist age has several excellent literary historians, but no actual historian of literature.

One of the reasons that led to this deadlock might have to do with the way Romanian criticism altered, to its own profit, the formalist-structuralist methods. Contrary to what happened in other parts of Europe, in Romania these methods were never approached in terms of a general poetics of literarity, but applied in practical analyses. Therefore, their innovating potential was not pondered at the systemic literary level, but was assessed from the narrower perspective of text analysis. The dogmatic hiatus of socialist realism left behind an acute need to consolidate the purity of the literary object. This utopia fuelled the entire Romanian criticism after 1964, but also blocked changes in literary historiography: these would have required more nuanced views upon the impurity of the object of literary history has. As a matter of fact, European literary historiography managed to surpass the structuralist dead-end only by acknowledging the fact that literature has an impure nature. Starting from the 80s, the long-forgotten Theses of the Prague Linguistic

¹⁸ Marin Mincu, *Ion Barbu. Eseu despre textualizarea poetică* (Ion Barbu. Essay on poetic textualization) (Bucharest: Cartea Românească, 1981).

¹⁹ Mihai Zamfir, "Istoriografia literară în faza sintezelor" (Literary historiography in the syntheses phase), in *Istoriografia literară românească: 1944-1984* (Romanian literary historiography: 1944-1984) [n.a.] (Bucharest: Minerva, 1984), 123.

²⁰ Paul Cornea, Introduction, in *Structuri tematice și retorico-stilistice în romantismul românesc (1830-1870)* (Thematic and rhetoric and stylistic structures in Romanian Romanticism 1830-1870), ed. Gabriela Duda, et al. (Bucharest: Ed. Acad. R.S.R., 1976), 8.

Circle (I. Tînianov, J. Mukarovski) about parallel historical series, or M. Bahtin's culturalist views on literary evolution were revived within the *New Historicism*. They all share a relativistic conception of the aesthetic, which is no longer assumed as a strong value, but understood as a volatile function changing according to collectivity, tradition, taste etc. On the contrary, post-war Romanian criticism was neither ready nor eager to negotiate the aesthetic principle. No wonder that the Prague Circle's project of a parallel study of literary and cultural-historical forms was very little-known in Romania, outside Mihai Pop's ethnologic school²¹: a similar program, more closely derived from Russian historical poetics, is developed in Ioana Em. Petrescu's excellent book about the comical epic.²² Otherwise, it is obvious that the limited, strictly analytical concept of structure applied by most Romanian critics could not have formed the ground for a history of literary structures: such a history should have, instead, rebuilt the bridges with structures of society, mentalities or reception.

Once again, Nicolae Manolescu tries to connect the two levels, reflecting on the tallies between literary typologies and the sociological environment (in *Noah's Ark*), respectively the variations of reception (in *The Critical History of Romanian Literature*). Without going into much detail, I shall confine the discussion to observing that the critic does not entirely follow the program he himself announces in both forewords of a parallel study of systems. The typology of the Romanian novel²³ is, nevertheless, convincing and unequalled in efficiency up to this day; but it is built on immanent, narratological premises and, compared to this main level of analysis, the social structures the author mentions remain simplified and somehow exterior. Furthermore, his larger project of a "history of forms", supported by a certain tendency to marginalise literary contexts, is rivalled and, to some extent, even mined by the author's canonizing aims. His *History* stands out not quite as a reflection upon the internal temporality of literature, but especially as an effort to canonise great literary works and great authors.

But since the topic has already been much debated, towards the end of my paper I shall focus on two other projects of "history of forms" developed by Romanian critics. Mircea Scarlat's praiseworthy *History of Romanian Poetry*²⁴ leaves us regretting that it only covers a single literary genre. Of course, setting clear confines helps the researcher approach in a more focused manner the genre's inner

²¹ Mihai Pop, *Folclor românesc. I. Teorie și metodă* (Romanian folklore. I. Theory and method), ed. Nicolae Constantinescu, Alexandru Dobre (Bucharest: Grai și Suflet – Cultura Națională, 1998).

²² Ioana Em. Petrescu, *Ion Budai-Deleanu și eposul comic* (Ion Budai-Deleanu and the cosmic epic) (Cluj: Dacia, 1974).

²³ Nicolae Manolescu, *Arca lui Noe. Eseu despre romanul românesc* (Noah's Ark. Essay on the Romanian novel), Vols. 1–3 (Bucharest: Minerva, 1980–1983).

²⁴ Mircea Scarlat, *Istoria poeziei românești* (The history of Romanian poetry), vols. 1–4 (Bucharest: Minerva, 1982–1986).

historicity and the specific dynamics of poetic conventions. Scarlat's overarching categories – the system of assumptions about poetry, materialised differently in every age and with different rhetorical strategies – are general enough to be considered trans-historic, but also flexible enough to assume various historical contents. Unfortunately, the historian uses a dichotomic terminology – and speaks of the “signified” and “signifier” of the poetic convention –, reminding of the outdated dissociation between content and form. However, on the whole, Mircea Scarlat manages to create an organic and convincing scenario, with evolution, growths and decreases, around a literary object carefully cleansed by “ineffable” connotations (the author is not speaking of Poetry, but of the “poetic convention”). It is true, the interpreter places perhaps too much emphasis upon the local, autochthonous factor and reduces, sometimes completely unduly, the contribution of foreign literary influences; but these shortcomings do not overrule the whole methodological gains of his history.

Finally, Mihai Zamfir's project of “diachronic stylistics” extends over a long span of time, from the critic's debut in 1971 until his 2011 *Short History of the 19th century*.²⁵ All along this interval, the critic has not changed in the slightest his reluctance towards historical factology and literary contexts. This tendency might have been well understandable in the autonomist critical climate of the 1970s and 1980s. But in 2011, this insulated conception of literature appears as an anachronism. Mihai Zamfir's “history” is not only short, but essentialised, as the historian regards his matter from a superlative axiological level (“the perennial aesthetic value of the text”). The tendency already obvious in the excellent essays from *The Other Side of Prose* has now become a trap for the historian: he sees the exception everywhere, never the series. The only way Mihai Zamfir is able to explain how literary genres or formulae evolve is by pointing out the writer's genius (usually born *ex-nihilo*), by stating that authors “feel the literary forms”. Instead of grasping the typological unity out of the variety of literary formulae – and thus fulfil his project of a diachronic stylistics –, the exegete dispels the “unity” in multiple “unities”. What we are left with is a sort of exception-ist literary history, where almost every author stands out from their range in one way or another, but the range itself is no longer discernible. A history of absolute beginners, where every writer heralds a new tendency, direction, formula, but their predecessors or followers fade away in the scenery. The historian places an exclusive – and inadequate for such an enterprise – accent on particularity, difference, discontinuity. He always points out the individual, but never the underlying system. Frequent qualifiers like “unpredictable”, “impossible to explain”, “unusual”, “strange in the

²⁵ Mihai Zamfir, *Scurtă istorie. Panorama alternativă a literaturii române* (Short history. The alternative prospect of Romanian literature), vol. 1 (Iași, Bucharest: Polirom, Cartea Românească, 2011).

context”, “striking”, “atypical”, “instinctive”, “intuitive”, nouns like “miracle”, “exception”, or adverbs like “very rarely”, “seldom” seem to suggest atypicality is *the* norm in literary history.

A consistent stylistician and a critic extremely well-learned in narratology and formalism, Mihai Zamfir would have, probably, had the best prospects to write a history (even a partial one) of literary forms. But instead, in bringing a confirmation and an apotheosis of his valuable contributions from the 1970s and 1980s, the 2011 *Short History* falls one step back. The critic started from the most modern outposts of literary analysis, only to slide back to an old-fashioned aestheticism, and instead of painting the big picture, he chose to draw brooding portraits of “great writers”.

In conclusion, we could observe that Mihai Zamfir’s evolution is symptomatic for the inability of post-war Romanian criticism to provide a history of literary forms. Although the 1964–1989 age produced a climate fruitful enough in this direction, the myth of the “great writer”, and a maximalist conception about “aesthetic value” (irreducible to series or typologies) hindered Romanian criticism from achieving such a project.