

ROMANIAN LITERARY HISTORIOGRAPHY. THE SHORT HISTORY OF A POLEMIC

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Abstract Starting from some examples of the famous Romanian literary critic and historian G. Călinescu's misreading of some words or lines of the poems he edited, and also quoting a few of his most striking conclusions on Eminescu's erotic life and poems, Romanian philologist I.E. Torouțiu made some methodology observations and reproaches which infuriated the editor. The present paper follows their literary polemic step by step, from its beginning in 1932 to the apparent ceasefire, in 1937. We shall try to locate this episode within our national literature, paying attention to the relevance of the case under discussion for the specific practices of text editing, author ranking, conflicting views, and cultural clash relevance.

Keywords G. Călinescu – I.E. Torouțiu Polemic, Philological Take, History of Literature, Text Editing.

One of the numerous interesting cultural polemics from the interwar period was the one that opposed G. Călinescu, as a literary historian, to the philologist I.E. Torouțiu. Their voices actually represented two contradictory views on culture. For the famous critic, the talent (especially his own), as a state of grace, justified everything – any error in logic in speculation, any inaccuracy in decoding or rendition of the literary documents, any mistake or unfortunate intervention in the transcription / publication of the unique texts, any enormity in the viewpoint of the interpretation – see his reading of Eminescu's love poems through the lens of Freudianism, which led the author of *Opera lui Mihai Eminescu* [Mihai Eminescu's Work] to statements such as this: "Eminescu despises pretence. A true woman is genuine. She willingly comes to the woods, the place of rolling around and of coupling. (...) Confounded by the outer environment, it [the couple] is in awe, a state named by the poet «charm», which is the hieratic stillness of animals in the age of procreation. The Eminescian

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love is religiously mechanical,¹ "Intellectualism and sentimentalism, this is what the Eminescian eroticism is missing, in its genital foundation."² For the methodical philologist, quite the contrary was true, namely that everything that was not scientifically founded was, implicitly, useless from a cultural viewpoint – which also led him to certain exaggerations, as was the dismissal of the entire discussion on the Uranus/Neptune/Saturn component from Eminescu's lyricism.

The purpose of the present article is not represented by taking one side or the other of the two analysed stances. It will not establish "who was right" and who was not. To assess the value of the methods applied by each of the two men of letters under scrutiny would be useless, if not impossible, as the "cultural object" analysed by each of them differs greatly, although they apparently referred to one and the same thing: the case of Eminescu. Before going into the details of the polemic, we must mention that the reading grid used was that of a surface analysis of the case which equally focuses on the deeper motivations identifiable in the two authors' manners of approach. Thus, what at first glance would appear to be a polemic that started from the interaction between an editor and the edited text is revealed to be a significant cultural "war", whose goal was not – for either of the polemicists – the Eminescian *text*, but the Eminescian *brand*. Before taking the first step towards editing, each of the two polemicists had taken a very firm stance on what Eminescu represented for the Romanian national and cultural identity. Around this hard core, the constructive efforts of each of the two men of letters are wrapped, with the implicit differences in attitude, expression and methodology.

Let us begin from the first clash of swords. In 1932, G. Călinescu published *Viața lui Mihai Eminescu* [The life of Mihai Eminescu]. In the afterword, he confessed to having used the data offered by the researchers before him and he bragged for having compiled his work with no "visible stiches"³ and what was shocking for the expectations of the philologist Torouțiu was that he did not cite his sources – "Not once are quotation marks present in the entire book in which Mr. G. Călinescu absorbs materials from other people's works. He does not know that these marks are part of punctuation in ways other than the ironic sense, when he mocks: «the scientists», «science», «scientific rigour»"⁴ – moreover, under the pretext of the paper crisis (although his work was 480 pages long, so it was not quite compressed!), he makes no references and he has no footnotes; he promises to make them in a future history of the Romanian literature. Therefore, on a technical level, it resembles a popularisation work, dedicated to a general audience. Torouțiu was

¹ G. Călinescu, *Istoria literaturii române. Compendiu* [The history of Romanian literature. Compendium] (Bucharest: Editura Minerva, 1983), 166-167.

² See I.E. Torouțiu, *Pagini de istorie și critică literară* [Pages of literary history and criticism] (Bucharest: Editura Bucovina, 1936), 229.

³ Ibid., 146.

⁴ Ibid., 148.

horrified by this means of conduct, just as he was horrified by the author's desire to create sensation: "the writing was launched like an American movie"⁵, "the information regarding the poet's sick period played no other role [than to create sensation, A.N.]."⁶ Torouțiu thus pointed out all of these aspects and many more in a scholarly journal⁷ and in a volume – *Pagini de istorie și critică literară* [Pages of literary history and criticism].

The following act of the polemic takes place on neutral ground: D. Murărașu published a work on Eminescu's nationalism. Torouțiu praised it. Predictably, G. Călinescu blasts it in his magazine *Adevărul Literar și Artistic* [The literary and artistic truth]. Murărașu did not respond to Călinescu. Torouțiu, however, replied in his stead by making a pertinent demonstration of the fact that "Mr. Călinescu read Mr. Murărașu's study superficially and he presented it in ill faith"⁸. Having a temperamental nature and led by great vanities, G. Călinescu was not the man to admit contradiction. The polemic had become one that was extremely relevant for literary history through the direct exchanges between Torouțiu and Călinescu. In 1934, the critic published *Opera lui Mihai Eminescu* [Mihai Eminescu's work]. Thus, by referring to both the poet's life and to his writings, he compiled Eminescu's *monograph*. From this position (that of a monographer), in Torouțiu's eyes, he had no excuse; Torouțiu's expectations regarding the philological posture of the analysis were thus justified, since the voice of G. Călinescu was charged with a form of authority on the subject and an equal responsibility. It would appear that the philologist's expectations were, however, not met. Torouțiu did not rush to immediately reply; he calmly continued his own studies on the Eminescian documents and manuscripts, he read Călinescu's work and he made observations that he only published in 1936⁹, in the form of a 108-page long detailed analysis in which he argued logically, he offered proof for everything he stated and – an aspect that today is essential – he did not accuse G. Călinescu by *paraphrasing* him, but by constantly *citing* him on every issue that, in his opinion, had not been well approached. The exact rendition of the incriminated fragments represents a major difference of understanding and of methodology between the two authors. The issue itself deserves a deeper reflexive thought: if the text authored by X is a given (either as a unique manuscript or as an already published text), what are the limits between which one can later juggle with its form? For the great authors, the issue of the editions is spread across centuries, across the entire duration of culture. What are the rights of the editor, as compared to the author of the text, or, more precisely, where is the border across from which its modified physiognomy

⁵ Ibid., 146.

⁶ Ibid., 153.

⁷ The magazine *Mihai Eminescu*, Cernăuți, 1932.

⁸ Torouțiu, 138.

⁹ In his aforementioned book.

transforms text *X* into text *Y*? The answer to this complex question cannot be a simple one. A minimal guarantee would be, we believe, the editors' good faith. This is the reason why I emphasised the importance of the impact of citation and of paraphrasing, respectively. The paraphrase is a restatement, and where the good intentions are absent, it can become an intellectual trick through which, under the pretext of the economy of means, the one who paraphrases replaces – in the unacknowledged position of a co-author – the one whose text he culturally manipulates. From the very beginning, Torouțiu distanced himself from these practices, preferring to cite the text of his opponent. The demonstration is scrupulous, very rigorous and almost unassailable (with the exception of two points that are minor in relation with the whole). The tone is firm, sometimes ironic, sometimes harsh, but well within the limits of civility. It would be futile to reproduce here the entirety of Torouțiu's argument; moreover, it would not reflect the purpose of the present paper but, as we have stated before, the idea is strictly to present the polemic between the two men of letters, with a focus on the manner of the polemizing and the relevance of such a situation for the history of the Romanian literature.

From Torouțiu's critical study, G. Călinescu chose only a few observations to which he responded, overlooking the others. Since his reply is much shorter than the philological "indictment" from which it began, we are able to follow it point for point. Călinescu's response was not a defence, but an attack. His irritation for Torouțiu's accusations translated to vehemence, hubris and an overreacting tone. The violence of the retort overwhelms and hides the legitimate dimension of Călinescu's perspective. Undoubtedly, each of them had the right to be subjective. If each had assumed the other's right to subjectivity, it would have been an exchange of ideas, rather than a polemic. But Călinescu negates any level of competence and literary taste of his adversary: "I consider that his spirit lacks any subtlety and any training for the delicate operation that is the perception of beauty and the understanding of ideas"¹⁰; "a narrow spirit"¹¹, "Mr. Torouțiu is simplistic"¹² (in the sense of being ignorant), "to enter the subtleties forbidden to his mind (...) would be inappropriate"¹³. The entire article is mined by sufficiency, hubris, lack of objectivity; the style is insinuating and biased, which could incline the reader to give more credit to the one who was being vilified. From this virulent polemic, G. Călinescu loses more than even Torouțiu himself would have hoped.

The article published in *Adevărul Literar și Artistic* debuts with an insinuation: "In a fairly thick volume, printed on an absolutely beautiful paper, Mr.

¹⁰ G. Călinescu, "I.E. Torouțiu: Pagini de istorie și critică literară" [I.E. Torouțiu: Pages of literary history and criticism], in *Adevărul Literar și Artistic*, 28 febr.1937.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

Torouțiu attacks, in the name of morals and in the name of science, a certain number of authors.¹⁴ Thus, one can understand that Torouțiu had at his disposal paper (and financial funds) to burn. The critic insists on this aspect: “But one could ask: who is Mr. Torouțiu (...)? Well, Mr. Torouțiu is a person who, *by owning a printing press, is entitled to print different literary documents* (emphasis mine) and, by printing them, he is entitled to take note of certain information through which old news can be corrected. This luck-assisted *feat* is supposed to be a contribution.¹⁵” This was far from the truth. I.E. Torouțiu, in 1936, was not merely a “nobody” who owned his own printing press. He was a corresponding member of the Romanian Academy (let us remember that G. Călinescu only became a member in 1949, when the former Academy had been dissolved and replaced with the R.P.R. Academy), a former assistant professor of Romanian language at the Frankfurt-am-Main University (in 1936, Călinescu was only a high school teacher and he was obtaining his PhD), he was especially not a “lucky” discoverer of certain literary documents, but the owner of the most vast scholarly archive in the history of the Romanian literature, acquired through his own funds and efforts. The over 16000 documents (170 manuscripts, 10873 letters, 4424 books and 580 titles of periodicals) from the Torouțiu collection, donated in his will to the Library of the Romanian Academy, were partially published by the philologist as part of the reference collection *Studii și documente literare* [Literary studies and documents] (13 volumes) beginning in 1931, five years before G. Călinescu considered him to be a “nobody” typographer... Today, we can retrospectively assess that both figures were true cultural “institutions”. Regarding the modesty, the difference between the two men of letters was from heaven to earth. Although he was excluded from the new communist Academy, Torouțiu remained faithful to his belief in the continuity of the generations through constructive and methodical study; he donated everything he had to the new Academy, the institution that had “purged” him, but which he saw as the only successor of the former Romanian Academy.

In respect to the objections regarding his not indicating his sources (for the ideas taken from his predecessors, for the information, for the Eminescu editions he used), G. Călinescu rejects them in bulk, by paraphrasing them, not citing them, as an elementary fair-play dictated, although Torouțiu had made precise objections, with complete references, indicating the pages and chapters that contained errors: “Chendi said a few words!”, “it would appear that we made the same transcription mistakes as Chendi. What a great discovery! But we cited, as everyone does (??), Chendi himself, *although we were aware of certain errors. Where would we end up if we were to also copy the texts published by others?*” (emphasis mine). We must note that, as a monographer and editor, G. Călinescu should have been compelled not to

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

copy, but to *verify* the texts, after Eminescu's manuscripts, as Torouțiu himself had done. He would have thus avoided numerous erroneous structures, some of which were outright embarrassing, as were the ones from *Ursitoarele* [The Fates]: "Ochii ard întunecoși/ Fața albă, buze roși,/ Iar când merge legănată/ Tremur *curii* [corect: *sinii*] și deodată/ Tremură frumsețea-i toată./ Nu-i subțire *ci'mpletită* [corect: *ci'mplinită*]/ Cum e bună de iubită"¹⁶ [The eyes burn dark / The white face, the red lips / When she waddles / Her *buttocks* tremble [correct form: *breasts*] and suddenly / Her entire beauty trembles. /She's not slender, she's *woven* [correct form: *full-bodied*] / Just right to be loved]. In his article, however, G. Călinescu does not breathe a word about such examples, precisely because he had no excuse.

One of Călinescu's manoeuvres from the article published in *Adevărul Literar și Artistic* is particularly severe due to its consequence: he established the dichotomy *text/contents*. "Starting from the erroneous assumption that we went to the manuscript to verify the text, while *we went there only for the contents*, Mr. Torouțiu offers a series of parallels which show that we made (...) transcription mistakes."¹⁷ Which implies that the critic turns to the manuscripts only for their "contents" and that he neglects the forms present in the texts; in other words, only *what* Eminescu said matters, not *how* he said it! This is an error in vision that can give vent to unlimited amateurism.

G. Călinescu's tactic is to make the public an ally by complaining that "this is the pettiness of the mediocre world of the «scientific researchers» that the reader must know"¹⁸; to the wide public, he declares that he had indeed processed the Eminescian poems from the manuscripts: "I often modernised the text by replacing *v'o* with *vr'o*, *pintre* with *printre*, so as to not frighten the reader whom we wished to captivate for Eminescu's unique works."¹⁹

Another interesting aspect, particularly on a sociological / anthropological level, is the audience that each author gathers. It is known that the Public (with a capital letter) is a projection with no covering in reality. No author, no matter how popular, addresses the Public, but a certain public, perhaps even several categories of public. Torouțiu addressed the niche of specialists, which led to his being rather unknown outside the world of the philologists and historians. With a definite natural endowment for shine, and for the sake of celebrity and of social status, Călinescu – whose biography transparently justifies his options – preferred the pact with the mid-level public and with the political system (Carlist – during the royal dictatorship, communist – during the Dej dictatorship), sacrificing the professional scruple. For Călinescu, the instinct to exploit the sources of power was determinant. I.E. Torouțiu had "caught" his weak point and accused him of "lack of character". As a retort,

¹⁶ I.E. Torouțiu, 239.

¹⁷ G. Călinescu, *I.E. Torouțiu: Pagini de istorie....*

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

Călinescu disparagingly called him a “izvorist” (source maniac) and considered him to be competent only in the field of “informative techniques”. At the end of a four-column article, in which he used a sovereign “so what?” in order to minimise the unacknowledged references from all the researchers and critics before him – a practice for which, today, an author would be charged with plagiarism -, the high school teacher dismisses the academician using the words of the painter Apelles addressed to the shoemaker who had confronted him for the incorrect rendition of a sandal: “Mr. Torouțiu should return to his sandal (...) *Ne sutor ultra crepidam*.²⁰”

The conclusion that can be drawn from this polemic carried out fiercely by both sides in the name of different values (the values of egocentrism, on the one hand, and the values of solidarity with scholarly tradition, on the other hand) is that philology and literary criticism should remain separate fields. The critic who trespasses into the field of the philologist, by faultily assuming his attributions (editing, establishing the versions, the footnotes and the documentary references etc.), is merely taking a hazardous chance and fails; in the same manner, the philologist who gives verdicts on taste or morals, by limiting the critic’s right to subjectivity, also trespasses into a foreign field. Such overlaps of fields, however, give way to sometimes captivating polemics.

Translated from Romanian by Anca Chiorean

²⁰ Ibid.