

Romanian Moralists: Maiorescu and Iorga

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ROMANIAN LITERATURE has produced, besides great poets, prose writers and literary critics, a large number of moralists, from Miron Costin and Cantemir to Cioran. One could say that, born a poet, the Romanian has become a moralist. He has a vocation for this kind of reflection in which he condenses his life experience, his *bickering* spirit (as G. Ibrăileanu says), together with the popular wisdom and the wisdom acquired from books. This is seen in the rich and original Romanian paremiology. Iuliu A. Zanne has published (around the year 1900) ten volumes of proverbs and sayings, after Iordache Golescu, before him, had printed, in 1845, a book in which he had gathered some of these old and sound reflections, already part of the Romanian popular imaginary. We could argue that, taken together, these proverbs and sayings form a *code of conduct* inspired by the traditional common morality (mainly rural), a code that appeared before modern culture. This code of conduct embraces all the essential acts of a human life, from love to death, and, between these fatal limits, it judges the virtues and vices of people, their beliefs and disbeliefs, as well as their relationship with the outside world. Among the moralists who, through their modern spirit, bring into discussion a more complete vision about man, seen as a sum of complexes, made up of contradictions and plagued with doubts and anxieties, must be mentioned not only the proper moralists (who appear later, toward the end of the 19th century and especially in the 20th century) but also the writers, the historians and the ideologists. Nicolae Bălcescu, Ion Ghica, Mihail Kogălniceanu, Alecu Russo, Ion Heliade-Rădulescu, C.A. Rosetti and, after them Titu Maiorescu and Mihai Eminescu are, to varying degrees and in different ways, genuine moralists. Their political and historical discourse is in part (sometimes its best part) also a moral discourse. We can find in it (as is the case with Kogălniceanu, Maiorescu or Eminescu) memorable reflections ranging from the vision of the universe to the behavior of the ordinary individual, with his gifts and shortcomings. We shall examine here, for reasons of space, only Titu Maiorescu and Nicolae Iorga.

This work was supported by a grant of the Romanian Ministry of Research and Innovation, CCCDI-UEFISCDI, project number PN-III-P1-1.2-PCCDI-2017-0821/INTELLIT, within PNCDI III.

Titu Maiorescu (1840–1917) is our first moralist in the true sense of the word (and of the genre), that is, an observer and a harsh judge of the mores of his society, as well as a fine analyst, slightly skeptical (if not entirely skeptical) of the psychology and the morality of the individual. Skepticism is, among other things, part and parcel of being a moralist. In his reflections (aphorisms), he does what Montaigne, as we remember, asked: “to reinterpret the interpretations that interpreted the things.” Maiorescu, I think, does not follow so closely this chain of causalities and determinations. He reflects on knowledge (and, when he does so, he cites other authors and thus positions himself relative to them), he spots the illogical things and the incongruities in the texts of his contemporaries, he does, in short, what any intellectual, highly endowed with the gift of reflection, usually does: he talks about *ideals*, about *death* and *immortality*, about *truth*, *art* and *civilization* and, even more than that, he calls into question *intelligence* itself. In other words, he reflects upon his own instruments of reflection. This proves that he had closely read the French moralists and was not unfamiliar with the ancient thinkers and the German moral philosophy. On the contrary, he takes a special and constant interest in this topic. He publishes, in the magazine *Convorbiri literare* (Literary Conversations), translations from *Faust*, and, after two years, between 1872 and 1877, the Romanian translation of Arthur Schopenhauer’s *Aphorisms on the Wisdom of Life* (published in book format in 1890). His preoccupation with Schopenhauer’s pessimism is older. The minutes of the meetings of the Junimea cultural association record that, in December 1865, when the topics of the popular lectures were discussed, the critic proposed “The Ideal Pessimism” (Schopenhauer), and, on 29 October 1871, he read from Schopenhauer’s aphorisms (their translation was published in the journal on 1 November, 1872). In the next months, the critic also presented Schopenhauer’s pages on honor and his pamphlet against Hegel (“On University Philosophy”), etc. In the Preface to the second edition of the volume (1890), we note the translator’s characterization of the philosopher of pessimism: “the sarcastic flagellation of the conventionalism of the modern society, the mocking of the official philosophy, delivered *ex cathedra*, the disdain for the democratic leveling [of the society] and the aversion against the Jews, whom he cannot forgive for the ethical and esthetical decadence they brought upon the European society through the Old Testament,” followed by a critical stance against the notion of a radical pessimism given as a general truth.

Maiorescu shows thus that he reserves judgment before accepting what he reads. In other words, if we again recall Montaigne’s phrase, he *subjectively interprets the interpretations that interpret...* Another proof that the moralist has mastered the technique of reflection and uses it without hesitation when he comes across the work of a great moral philosopher:

Schopenhauer is the philosopher of pessimism. One of the tenets of this philosophy is formulated also in the following sentence of the present Aphorisms: “Any pleasure is negative, while pain is positive.” We consider this statement unfounded and, therefore, pessimism does not seem to us to be a general truth. It corresponds however to a subjective disposition of many people of culture and even genius (Lord Byron, Leopardi, etc.) and constitutes nevertheless an integral part of the great human conceptions. Many social

*problems studied from this point of view are cast in a new light and allow for a more precise solution and the movement sprang from Schopenhauer's theories is an antidote against the materialist platitude towards which the current epoch inclines.*¹

Maiorescu also translated Jacob Grimm's *Discourse on Old Age* (published, after the critic's death, in *Convorbiri literare*, January 1922) and, in 1910, he published "excerpts" from the authors he had read in the past 60 years, as he confesses in an introductory note: "We all seek, writes the critic, to expand our limited knowledge and experience through the knowledge and experience of others. On purpose or unknowingly, we have appropriated a part of the treasure gathered by our predecessors, and the way of seeing the world is for many of us entirely formed, for some at least strengthened, for all somewhat modified through the secret collaboration of the authors we have read."

The "excerpts" are from *The Letters of Lord Chesterfield to His Son* and from *The Memoirs of Cardinal de Retz*. Let us recall some maxims whose topics are the themes on which Maiorescu himself will reflect in his aphorisms. For example, "undeserved praise is an insult" or "there are two incompatible passions, that nevertheless go often together, like husband and wife, quarrelling with each other frequently: ambition and avarice," "a numerous gathering is always plebeian, no matter what individuals it is composed of" or "if you want to know the society, go to its parties; in serious matters, the character is hidden, at parties it is revealed," next a maxim that makes an appeal to caution: "live with your enemies as if they would become your friends; this happens often in times of political changes," etc. Some of these maxims, I repeat, fit the Romanian legislative critic, some not. In Maiorescu's aphorisms and conduct, the distrust of praise, for example, is translated into the idea of *impersonalization*, the rise of the spirit (and of the man who represents it) above the contingencies of reality. The longing for the *ideal* is, in other words, the wisdom always recommended by the critic. *Prudence* in all things is, again, another rule in his philosophy of life. Next, the skeptical attitude in political relationships. Some of the lord's remarks, however, are not to be found in Maiorescu's reflections, for example, the advice to smile to your enemies, an easier way to defeat them than open enmity. As we know, Maiorescu was not at all kind, pleasant and smiling to his opponents, in Parliament or in his literary criticism. On the contrary, he was a formidable polemist, without resorting to vulgarity and insult (old habits in our political and literary world). Also, the notion that wisdom could mix with pleasure, or, better said, that serious intellectual pursuits do not hinder pleasure, but rather "complete each other," has no appeal for Maiorescu the moralist.

He is rather a somber man, aloof in public and having a small circle of friends. However, as we see in his *Daily Notes*, he does not spare even them. "Mere trifles," he writes about some of Ioan Slavici's writings. In the same vein is also the moral portrait, accurate but harsh, of his future brother-in-law, Rosetti. Friendship is not a criterion of evaluation. He does not hesitate to disagree with Goethe, who considers that a man is defined "especially by what he finds laughable." Maiorescu corrects him in his diary (in 1858, at age 18): "he is wrong, a man is defined exactly by what he finds pitiable."² The great Goethe (the epitome of the Germanic man) is revised through Schopenhauer. As for *entertainment*, as far as we can tell after reading his confessions, it is not includ-

ed in Maiorescu's life code. This does not mean that the young Maiorescu, as a student in Vienna, and later, when he lives in Paris, preparing his Ph.D., leads the life of a monk. If he enjoys himself, he does so in a discreet manner, without making confessions in his diaries. From *The Memoirs of Cardinal de Retz* he selects mainly those maxims that fit his way of seeing the virtues and the moral failures of the human being. For example, "distrust deceives you more often than trust" or "the weak men always yield, but never at the proper time," "of all the passions, fear weakens judgment most," "what is necessary is never ridiculous," "who gets drown in details, is not only short-sighted, but also vile," or "on important matters, you must avoid making jokes" etc.

When we read Maiorescu's reflections, scattered accross all his writings,³ we see that he is very serious, indeed, about his matters of interest. He does not joke, he is humorless, though he has a sense of irony one would be well advised to avoid. His famous intellectual irony, the look from above, from the upper floor of ideas... He uses it less frequently in his aphorisms but he does not forget to resort to it when he speculates on moral ideas and human behavior. He likes to surround an idea with a short explanatory essay, in which he digresses, makes analogies, comparisons, as, for example, when he talks about the man who believes himself to be immortal and the others mortals. Struck by misfortune, he then panics and begins to confront his mortality. The moralist (who is only 18 years old) ponders over these wounds of the heart that heal without leaving any trace, to paraphrase a biblical text: "there is no trace where the spear has passed. As the sky does not keep any trail of wings, the cleaved wave, no furrow of keel, likewise the thought of death passes through the human heart. Just with the delicate tear shed by nature over those we love, drips this thought in their grave (*Epistolary*, July 1853)."⁴

Let's take a look at some other exercises of his intelligence. Regarding *perfection*, he thinks that the hardest thing is to find the sound middle way, a precept also recommended by the classical authors. Maiorescu brings forth his arguments, saying that nothing in the world is absolute—another common idea—and that "endless preparations hinder the action."⁵ Therefore: "Start working hard and place a stone which, although is not yet a building, is still a cornerstone!"⁶ Next comes a more laconic—as, in fact, the genre demands—and better formulated aphorism: "but to explain does not mean to justify."⁷ This is a later aphorism, reformulated many times and written down at maturity. It amends somewhat the pleasure of the student at Theresianum to explain the *accepted ideas* from his readings. Human relationships, the moralist believes, are either good, or bad, but never indifferent, and, when people are at a crucial moment, they must be driven not by the mind, "which indicates only the alternatives," but by the heart. A surprising idea for Maiorescu who certainly is not a man of the heart. "The final direction," says Maiorescu, "is given by the heart."⁸ This is also, as we remember, Pascal's belief, in the wake of Augustine, regarding the access of the faithful to divinity ("c'est le cœur qui sent Dieu, et non la raison"). Maiorescu, the incorruptible rationalist, translates this idea into the existential plane. And still, he puts *understanding* in the service of knowledge, and understanding is based on reason. True morals are founded also on understanding which, in its turn, substitutes "blind necessity." A very special science, he says, is "knowing what you do not know."⁹ And also from the domain of knowledge: "where is a necessity, there must be a possibility,"¹⁰ or, speaking about truth in knowledge: "there are so many truths as points of view." Therefore, there is no single truth.

Subjectivity could have one role in this process—“the exquisite subjectivity,” the emblem of “the one initiated by Spirit with a smiling look.” Maiorescu, mindful of nuances, comments on this phrase which is not his: “all things are indifferent in themselves and depend on the people to make something from them.”¹¹ This suggestion, we could add, may also be applied to literature, although literature is not an inert object. It is not, but a good piece of writing is always interpretable. It depends, indeed, on who reads it and who judges it. Going back to Maiorescu, the moralist philosopher, we notice that his reflections (*musings*) deal less with the existential situations in their form experienced by the individual, as with the means of knowing and classifying them. He makes a distinction in this sense: in every man, he says, “there are at least two men: *the man of ideas* and *the man of the senses* (mind and heart).”¹² It is easy, when you read him, to notice that, when he deals with man, he deals with the man of ideas, and, if his lucid and skeptic spirit investigates the man of senses, his focus is on the mind. He talks somewhere about experience (“personal experience is the best school”), but in his *Aphorisms* there are few references to it. “Who has seniority?” he asks somewhere else. The answer: “the one who, in action, forgets about himself.”¹³ He actually recommends many times the “impersonal enthusiasm” as a working instrument. Only this, he details, “puts on your forehead the mark of the chosen ones.”

And there is no secret that the translator of Schopenhauer considers himself one of the *chosen*. And rightfully so. He certainly is a spirit much needed in Romanian culture and he comes right on time to bring order to all the mixed-up things of his era. His reflections, I repeat, also try to bring order to the instruments of knowledge and the ethics of understanding. Almost all his maxims tackle this problem which clearly concerns him to the maximum degree. He constantly repudiates the inertia of the spirit, although he also rejects the excessive speculation regarding *perfection*. He says once more that “the sound middle way” is good. The art of life? It must be based on “caution, discretion, moderation, generally negation and, in brief, abnegation,” “save your emotions for those things that are worthy.” Therefore, a skeptical mind, sober, discreet, and, although he praises in one sentence “the charming freshness of spontaneity,” his turn of phrases is polished, expressive in their truth and direct style, harsh, never diluted or unnecessarily adorned, dilated by spontaneity. The skeptical moralist makes room, in this complex mechanism of knowing, in general, and of knowing oneself, in particular, for *pain*, *suffering* as instrument of understanding, of insight. “Only pain focuses your thoughts and gives them the power of insight.” An idea also encountered, as we know, in Eminescu’s work. It comes from Schopenhauer and goes now into the laboratory of a tempered skeptic, decisive in his actions.

Moving to another level, what does he tell us about the elements of the real? Firstly, in the wake of Hegel, he tells us that “what is real is rational,” and then that the purpose of education is “the annihilation of selfish limitation” (in Maiorescu’s conceptualizing language) and that people are happy “as long as they still have hope in an ideal.” Next: “the first step on which we rise in the world is a sacrificial altar.” This time the moralist taught by philosophers talks about sacrifice in every superior human action. We have already cited his idea that the reason of our existence is “the ideal sacrifice and no other.” *The ideal sacrifice?* This means, he tells us in a letter from 1875 to his friend Ștefan Vârgolici, that nothing in the world is possible if it is not “a pure emanation of the

soul.” “To work in vain” is the mark of this martyrdom. At the same time, it’s “the measure of everybody’s greatness” which is measured, in turn, through “the sum of sacrifices.” These intelligent speculations are a little bit too sophisticated (in any case, indeterminate and imprecise). Nevertheless, we get from them the idea in which Maiorescu believes since his adolescence (see *Daily Notes*, started when he was 15 years old), namely that great deeds—in the intellectual life but also in daily existence—need renouncing selfishness, a supreme sacrifice, as in the well-known Romanian ballad. What is God’s role in this moral and spiritual construction which the ambitious student of the Theresianum eagerly wishes to build in order to use it as his guide in life? As he writes in his *Philosophical Considerations* (1860), when he was 20 years-old, “God is nothing else than the abstracted humankind, and the concept of God, nothing else than the concept of mankind.” It is clear from other notations too that Maiorescu is not a religious spirit or, in other words, that his skepticism does not accept that God exists. His rationalistic mind does not accept the idea of immortality of the soul. At 17, he is already convinced that, in order to find the truth, he must doubt everything, starting with *accepted ideas*. It is worth citing this early fragment, so emphatic in its refusal to admit what reason does not accept: “A confusing skepticism has seeped into me, a questioning of all the traditional things, even of the idea of God and of the immortality of the soul, simultaneously with the impossibility of conceiving the absolute. To what swings is subjected my soul in this regard! Who compels me to admit a God who is totally unconceivable by my reason? But, at the same time, it compels me to confuse my mind with the necessity and incomprehensibility of what is unconditionally given.”

Without intending to, Maiorescu the logician falls into the paradox of the Cretan, for—if he doubts everything that exists prior to being verified and confirmed by his reason—then even his doubt toward God must be doubted. So, with the doubt of doubt, Maiorescu takes his atheism further: “It was not God who created man in His image and likeness, but every man forges their God according to their own image.” In other words, God is nothing but an ideal of man, the ideal of that which their soul has “best and noblest upon a hallowed altar.” There is some truth in these denying phrases, if we judge them from a moral angle, and that is that God is and should be, for the faithful and unfaithful individual, first and foremost, a *moral model* in daily life. It is God that brings with Him, if one discusses Christianity, the morals of tolerance and love for one’s neighbors. But, to say it one more time, Maiorescu denies the existence of God and leaves morals to man.

What of philosophy, what does philosophy promise and, most of all, what can it do with this ball of doubts, belief and unbelief? Philosophy “takes wrong turns” when, dealing with isolated facts, does not see *the whole* and does not judge the *particular* according to this *whole*. More directly stated, philosophy must encompass (“in one regard”) the overwhelming diversity of individual cases, parts, fragments. Only thus, from the perspective of the *whole*, can philosophy avoid getting lost in inconclusive speculations and *burdening details*, as we have seen in a sentence translated by him. A “unilaterally delimited” science does not exist, for a *norm* must exist in everything, adds the philosopher Maiorescu.

What of man? What is man and what relationship is he in with outside things? Here, the skepticism of the moralist is everything: “How pitiful man is! No absolute existence, all relativities: and the word relationship is a byword for human misfortune.” But is he who ponders the relativities of man not human himself, and if so, if he is (unmistakably) human, do his judgments of the relativities of generic man remain not relative, doubtful? The logician falls into a paradox again. He avoids it by saying that philosophy is not hard science, such as mathematics, where fundamental, irreducible truths are gathered. Only *scientific philosophy* (“the philosophy of our time”) can replace the *hypothetical philosophy* of the past, as declared by the philosophy professor in 1889, at the inauguration of the university course. But he does not say how exact this new philosophy is. Or he says it using old concepts (*superior synthesis, conscience of the whole*, etc.). The one thing that remains certain is his idea that “truth is only proven totally.” An aphorism that suggests, as we have already indicated, that the *quill* (meditation that serves writing) “is mightier than the sword,” and that “understanding evil is a part of fixing it.”

With these righteous phrases, *the moral discourse* strays from the skeptical discourse that the moralist cultivates from the very beginning. This is, in other words, the meaning of every moralist. If he did not question the truths that he has received, what point would there be in his literature? Maiorescu walks this path: redefining concepts, systematically refusing relativities—his spirit seeks *the ideal, the whole*, as it was seen—seeks *the absolute* and finds it, sometimes in impersonal thought, separated from the bustle of the concrete, of the particular... Art seems to be, out of so many uncertain things, a form of ascension and purging of the spirit. In the study “Direcția nouă în poezia și proza română” (The new direction in Romanian poetry and prose) of 1872, we find phrases that exalt the power of *beauty* to vanquish the relativities, sufferings, uncertainties of man: “Yes, in the fortunate world of arts, time has no more power and no more meaning, and he who, ascended to his sphere, knew how to craft a beautiful form—he, of course, but he alone—has reached the path of immortality.”

What of *originality*? The critic wondered about it in an aphorism from his youth. The answer is that originality lies “in thought, not in style as such.” This is an assertion that may be questioned, for originality in literature, let us say, cannot be separated from the *form, the style, the writing* in which it is expressed. Moving on, the creator of aesthetic criticism, when speaking of style, requires that style be *clear* in prose, and that poetic style should know the material elements (as per the words of the critic) that “give sensitivity to the thoughts of objects.” Strangely, the rigorous and often rigid rationalist Maiorescu does not like Flaubert and Zola, because, he says, “their hearts are not warm,” and, alluding to Maupassant, he accuses them of “writing under the gray sky of blasé skeptics whose writings become as cumbersome as a third week of rain.” He confesses this in a letter (1890) addressed to Duiliu Zamfirescu. But a question comes to our minds: is *writing under the gray sky* not something that involves style, is it not a construction of epic style? Worth keeping in mind in these phrases is the notion (category) which includes these “blasé skeptics.” Declaring himself a skeptical spirit, what category can Maiorescu be placed into? Maybe that of active, analytical skeptics, those who like digging around, thirsty for the absolute and the ideal... At any rate, with his

programmatic skepticism, he denounced literary conventions and changed the direction of the literature of an era, introducing the principle of the autonomy of aesthetics into the judgment of value. As a moralist in the sphere of ideas (the particular space of reflection), Maiorescu, as I have already said, severely censors his passions, his sensitivities, his existential anxieties, which does not mean that he did not know and experience them. Although he accepts concrete situations of *existence* as sources of meditation, he philosophically researches them and almost never puts his own anguish in his aphorisms. Rarely (and only in letters) does he link moral speculations to his own feelings. He is detached from the moralists of his century (most of them *ideologists, messianic figures, guides, prophets of nature*), remaining a cold, calculated rationalist, a superior speculative spirit, a skeptic along the lines of Cartesian skeptics, but one nourished by German moral philosophy and interested in its style of discussing the problems of man. Maiorescu rarely descends into the troubled areas of the soul to capture, in his aphorisms, that charming spontaneity of being...

THE REFLECTIONS (*Cugetări*) of Nicolae Iorga (1871–1940), 2,569 in number, first published in *Sămănătorul* (The Sower), under the title *Sfaturi ale unui om ca oricare altul* (Advice from a man like any other), and then collected in a volume in 1911, under the generic name known today,¹⁴ are, in their sagacious way, full of folk wisdom, *words of advice, true words, parables*, as we find them in the collection of proverbs published by Iordache Golescu in 1845. The difference is that their author is not an anonymous creator, but a learned young scholar with a colossal memory and a capacity for knowledge that was hardly matched in his time. He programmatically cultivates popular tradition and messianic figures such as Bălcescu or Kogălniceanu, always having *the ideal of nationality* as a point of reference. As a historian and scholar, he read the classics and extracted from their writings a small collection of aphorisms. In the same manner, he also consulted the proverbs of other nations and took from them what he thought essential. Having, himself, the calling of a moralist (from the branch of *moralizers*), he sought and succeeded to be a *guide*, and, to use again the term of Iordache Golescu, amoral and ideological *counselor* of his nation, and more than that, *an apostle*. He certainly had the required qualities: wisely, he recommends *measure* and *property, moderation* (virtues that all Romanian scholars speak of, from the Moldavian chroniclers to Kogălniceanu), praises *kindness* and *compassion*, and, lastly, sets in his musings some *norms of life* for Romanians. If there is a term that could define his moral thought and manner of existence that he preaches in well-articulated turns of phrase, it would be *order, proper order*.

Akin to the wise men in the prose of Mihail Sadoveanu, the historian who studied in European schools believes that all that there is, and even that which is not yet into the world, but could be, should have a *purpose*, and be in *proper order* or *according to the order of things*. Which means all must be in accordance with the ancient, unwritten laws, with the laws of nature. To be at peace with themselves and find their purpose in the world, individuals must hold onto the ancient *traditions*. Sadoveanu found the source of these in the teachings of Zalmoxis. However, Iorga does not dwell upon them, for his spirit strives to encompass and define all that is linked to human existence, virtues as well as sins. He is not an incorruptible rationalist, like Maiorescu, interested almost

exclusively in moral concepts, he seeks, like an exquisite moralist, the social man, and, like a Biblical prophet, scolds, threatens, persecutes those who stray from *order*. This is not the divine order that the abbots of old recall, but the current order of things. His repertoire includes from *genius* and *death* to *hatred*, *vanity*, *villainy*, and after those, every incongruity of human nature. When reading, in order, with pencil in hand, the 2,569 musings, and then his historical writings as well—*Istoria literaturii române în secolul al XVIII-lea* (The history of Romanian literature in the 18th century), for example, one easily notices that he praises good qualities and acts upon (mostly in a critical manner) the mentalities and the negativities of history and the individual, I repeat, with priority. Should one look upon the thematic index of the *Musings*, they will discover that at the letter N,¹⁵ the reflections of the moralist speak of *faithlessness*, *injustice*, *impudence*, *impatience*, *ignorance*, *unworthiness*, *ungratefulness*, and so on and so forth, each of them being notions and behaviors from the space of *morality*. Every *non-virtue*, so to speak, has a representative, so the moralist, determined to clarify and vituperate evil and imposture, quickly draws a portrait of each of them.

Who to start with? I choose a less morally detestable sinner, let us say, the *nitpicker*. Well, the nitpicker is the one who wastes his time and patience calculating the “ratio between sunlight and the light of a matchstick.”¹⁶ What of the *shameless*, what are they, and how do they behave in relation to others? “The shameless feel nothing when others feel shame upon even seeing them,”¹⁷ or “why bother wondering why he who has grown used to shame is shameless?”¹⁸ To better individualize the human type, the moralist, who has a score to settle with the shameless, uses a biblical symbol: “the devil has turned black so that he can no longer be ashamed.”¹⁹ The *envious* are also defined in this style inspired by Romanian proverbs (the style of concentrated parables): “The envious do not feel well on their own either; only the misfortune of others may bring them joy.”²⁰ More eloquent, in these wise sentences, is the repudiation of vices, of sins, in and of themselves. They are many and heavy in the *Musings* of Iorga, such as *nefariousness*, *sloth*, *hypocrisy*, and generally speaking, the lack of shame and decency. But what is *vice*? The moralist judges vices in bulk: “Vices are executioners who kill one slowly, like an unseen sword.”²¹ Even *thought* can become a more subtle vice when it judges itself on its own and with arrogance, for “whatever leans on thought alone has less merit than that which comes from the most unique of feelings.” Fair judgment should thus beware the vanity of selfishness and start from the bottom, from the lower state of feeling. Clearly, Iorga does not like people who cross the limits of common sense, decency, propriety—as we have seen from all of the quotes so far. He dislikes much of the behavior of people without order and a certain purpose in life. Even the *misfortune* that may befall them is an effect of wretchedness, according to the author of the *Musings*. Even when misfortune comes out of the blue, we may wonder? Misfortune as a harsh blow of fatality? Let us accept that even the proverbs and reflections of people can be discussed and interpreted.

Iorga always puts his wise sayings in a moral-social context, as he does, for example, when speaking of *adhesion* (respect, admiration, recognition), and *flattery*. “In the country where fighting is a mockery, of course, adhesion can be no more than flattery”²² he writes. *Words* can come under the sin of felony themselves, they can be treach-

erous: “A word is a traitor that eavesdrops on ideas and says what comes to it...” A fine reflection, justified not only in morals, but also in literature. Iorga particularly succeeds with these proverbs (*counsels*) placed in little fables. Here is a word of wisdom about amateurs, impostors, those who take advantage of that which they are incapable of creating: “Flies are fond of honey as well, oh, dilettantes, but they cannot make it.” This is also a short parable. Speaking of creation and of those who gravitate around it, let us see what the moralist-apostle says about writing, writers and, generally, about literature. Firstly, he says that “whoever writes for a few writes only for them; who writes for himself writes for all.” This is an apparently ambiguous judgment, but, essentially, it is right, for *writing for oneself* means writing not to please the few, but to arouse the interest and pleasure of the many, through the depth, authenticity and honesty of one’s writing. The moralist, careful for his truth not to remain a mere theory, but to have a consequence, writes in another aphorism: “write with your own soul and reread with the souls of others.”

The moral goes further with sound, commonsensical advice: upon doing a good thing (a valid work), a writer should not care about the opinions of those who speak ill of him; nevertheless the writer should pay attention not to be replaced by “the routine of the pen.” Otherwise, it is known from his ideological and moral criticism that in literature, Iorga has no love for formalists, for those who value the beauty of writing, while neglecting its content. In *Musings*, he makes a synthesis of his opinions and writes: “Too many believe literature to be writing, not meaning.”²³ The sentence should be continued in order to take that justified thought to complete truth: *writing without meaning*, indeed, has a short life because it does not encompass that which is essential, but neither does *meaning* reveal itself and make sense (significance, depth, the power to arouse the emotions of the reader) by itself, if its manner of writing does not have beauty and aesthetic authenticity... The moralist notes only half of the truth of literature. He ignores, here and in other texts, the role of *form*, or rather, *the content of form*, in literature. He wants “more soul in literature” (as he demands elsewhere that history be written “with heart”), which is not bad at all, but for *heart and soul* to allow themselves to be written, they must find their form. This is, as we know, the moment in which he writes (around 1903–1911) *his musings on imitation*: “Imitation in literature is impossible, which, under this name, becomes a form of plagiarism.”²⁴ We encounter this idea again, under a different combination, in a different reflection, which is, in part, theoretically justified as such: “literature is never renewed by technique, but must be resurrected by spirit.”²⁵ All good, but for spirit to impose itself in a work, it needs a *technique*. Without it, it remains an abstraction. Spirit and literary technique are usually born and travel together through the laboratories of a literary work. In this case, the sentence above, to reflect the full truth of the renewal of literature, should sound thus: “literature is never renewed through technique [alone]...” Another *musings*, closer to the truth of literature (which is difficult to capture within a single phrase), says that “the literary trade makes no sense; life from which literature can sprout makes sense.”²⁶ But there is something to be added here as well, which is that *to make sense and to give a sense to the life it reflects*, the literary work must come from the workshop of a good literary craftsman (creator). Finally, Iorga wants writing to seep, like resin, from the tree of life. In principle, that is true,

but something else is needed for the resin to symbolize the essential, namely the imagination of the creator: what fir tree is it leaking from?

The historian seems to guess, in another fragment, the role of the creator in this process. Defining the poet, he writes: “A poet is he who creates *that which has never been created*. The rest, mere smatterers.”²⁷ Where *that which has never been created* comes from and what it determines, the historian does not say, but leaves it to the imagination of the reader. His hostility toward profiteering criticism is much more explicit and radical. Not as much toward criticism itself (he is a literary critic himself, and a harsh judge, in his time, of the writings that contradict his taste and his ideology!), as toward critics who “have no other claim but that of cleaning forgotten tombs and lighting the extinguished candle of oblivion, and others, most of them, exhume with the studied indifference that relatives have after seven years, or with the voracious cruelty that hyenas have always had.”

More subtle is the analogy which suggests the figure of the critic who, let us say, without understanding the finesse and the secret of a poem, first repudiates it and then judges it (“many critics understand seeing the ice flower upon the window better after having melted it”).

Curiously, he also dislikes literary historians, narrow spirits, muddled in stereotypes, who regard literature from a strictly educational point of view: “Like a room where they keep their class register.” A successful comparison. Thus, behold the figure of a critic—an admonisher, a strict and unskilled teacher, who gives grades to literature without understanding its subtleties. A negative image of literary criticism that is popular in that age. E. Lovinescu identified it in the author of *Știința literaturii* (The science of literature) (Mihail Dragomirescu), the existentialist negationist Eugen Ionescu imagined the critic Berembest the same way: a monster of pedantic knowledge and rules, a monument of stupidity. From a moralizing angle, Iorga guesses the same type of criticism. Even more refined, more suggestive, is his observation regarding the relation between literature and its readers. Here, he encounters—great surprise—the idea of Paul Valéry (the aesthete of modernity), who writes in his *Notebooks* that there is a poetry that finds its readers in its own time, thus becoming accepted, and there is a poetry that does not find them, and must thus create the readers who should accept and cherish it tomorrow. Our moralist remarks, more simply and straightforwardly, that “there is a literature that serves its readers and another that creates them.”²⁸ Good intuition, fair judgment. The references to culture in this book of moral teachings are also good and suggestive. Here, the style of Miron Costin is often mixed with the acute and authoritarian style of a traditionalist ideologist in the joint property (his wording) of modernity. What is a cultured man?

The answer of the moralist is concise and encompassing, as is suitable for a prophet: “a mind open to kindness and beauty.” What significance does culture hold in the life of a nation? This answer is also short and eloquent: “without a flag of culture, a nation is a mob, not an army.” In reference to the morally and spiritually unifying role of culture in the history of a nation: “between the frontiers of a nation, culture can strengthen those bonds which cannot be seen and hindered.”

The problem of education through culture could not be absent from the repertoire of the *guide* Iorga. A moralist of his type is, by definition, an illuminist, a man who

has a steady hand at good writing, one who knows how to choose a useful book from a heap of bad ones. His choice is firm, like that of a censor tasked with stopping immorality: “for a young soul, there is no worse poison than a shameless book.” For the critical judgment to be fair to the end, we should define the boundaries of *shame* and *shamelessness* in literature. But this is a theme that requires another discussion. Regarding *art* in general, Iorga—consistent with his own ideas and morals—is against “art for art’s sake.” Art is, figuratively speaking, “a man and nature, not nature and a man,” he says. But man also comes first in this equation. But what is *man*? This is a question asked by any moralist/moralizer, regardless of their theories about morals. Iorga asks it repeatedly, without giving memorable answers. Pascal, as we remember, believes that man is a paradox (“quel paradoxe vous êtes à vous-même”), a paradox for themselves and a paradox for whoever wishes to determine the complexities (paradoxes) of their being. At any rate, as Pascal says, “man has lost his place in the world.” This means, as the French philosopher further writes, “that man has not only lost his fundamental conceptions, but the structure of his thoughts.” Other, less skeptical, moralists seek and find a model of man (*a human model*) which they recommend in their aphorisms and sentences. In a different era, with less philosophical subtleties, Iorga does not have a general definition of man as a being. He takes the *honest man* as a positive reference point, and without making references to Divinity, like medieval moralists seeks and judges, in brief, his virtues, and almost always, his fails. It has been seen that the honest man must be a good man, and if he gets to be one, he should not lie, he should not betray, he should not be wicked, but should mind his business, and so on and so forth. He is the image of the traditional man, the keeper of rules. Iorga makes also certain classifications: *the trustworthy man, the smart man, the useless man, the worthy man, the great man, the irreplaceable man*... without giving them memorable definitions.

His judging criteria are mainly Manichean. Man is evil, and thus full of sins (before anything else, *the wicked man takes no shame in being wicked*, and then, one after another, come all Biblical sins), or is good, and is thus *moderate, kind, never says that he is good* (“a good man is not one who does good and enjoys good”),²⁹ *keeps his word*... *Great men* have this quality, indeed, in their modesty, “they have not understood it as being greater than others,”³⁰ etc. Once more, Iorga does not probe the mysteries, complexities and anxieties of beings, as professional moralists are prone to do. He holds close to tradition and observes *social man* and his mores. He does reference the “mystery of being” at one point, but has no curiosity of opening the door for it... he is more interested in its sins. About philosophers (a recurring theme in the literature of moralists), the historian writes that “the only good philosophy is one in which the entire world can rejoice.” He is suspicious toward metaphysics, because it does not have any basis in the real world. It is “as a ladder that does not lean onto the ground and reaches out to Heaven.” As a paradox, the aphorism is well done. What of *old age*? “Only those who do not understand old age feel it,”³¹ “old age should be a moral situation.”³² The remark is acceptable, but upon accepting it, one immediately wonders: should and cannot the *moral situation* be analyzed? What of *death* (a subject which brings out the most anxieties in men, whether they are great or small, good or evil). Iorga finds, I think, an answer to this *wretched impossible matter*: “the great sorrow of death is that one

leaves without being able to take one with oneself.”³³ Splendid! On politics, the historian observes the behavior of the political man, and starts by saying that one should not judge someone who does politics by their words, but by their deeds. A truth that is known, yesterday, as today, without anyone being able to change anything (anything essential) in regard to mentalities. He remained a *man of words*, a product of empty rhetoric. Before politics became a *fatality* (the destiny of modern man), in the 18th century, Pascal declared himself disgusted with politics and refused to write about it. What about political parties? Iorga is even more brutal: “A political party that leans upon the suppression of consciences is more than a mere immorality, it is an impiety.” If we are not mistaken, the historian later created a political party, perhaps forgetting about this sentence: “Writing a great deal about politics is like seeking to set a madhouse right.”

What can we say, in conclusion, about the apostle-moralist Iorga other than the fact that he is, perhaps, our most productive moralist? Just this: that he thinks of man, in full Romanian modernity, in terms of tradition (*honest man*, with his purpose and respect for old rules, “ashamed” in his nature by the shamelessness of life, finally, a man who greets nothingness without terror, for he knows that everything in this world must have an ending, and that for as long as he lives, he must live honestly, and remain a *good, moderate man, in the spirit of kindness*). There are recurring terms in the *Musings* of Iorga, always thinking of the *traditional man*, whom he wants to rescue from the *shamelessness of modernity*. He is undisputedly the most productive of our moralizers, an opinionated spirit.

□

Notes

1. Arthur Schopenhauer, *Aforisme asupra înțelepciunii în viață*, transl. Titu Maiorescu, 3rd edition (Bucharest: Librăria Socec & Comp, 1891), VI–VII.
2. *Ibid.*, 45.
3. See the anthology Titu Maiorescu, *Cugetări și aforisme*, ed. Simion Ghiță (Bucharest: Albatros, 1986).
4. *Ibid.*, 35.
5. *Ibid.*, 39.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*, 41.
8. *Ibid.*, 43.
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*, 44.
11. *Ibid.*, 54.
12. *Ibid.*, 60.
13. *Ibid.*, 63.
14. According to Barbu Teodorescu, editor and bibliographer of the historian, in the introductory study to the volume Nicolae Iorga, *Cugetări* (Bucharest: Albatros, 1972). Further quotes are from this edition.
15. In the Romanian language, the use of the prefix *ne* forms the negative of a word, much like the English prefixes *in*, *un*, *im*. All of the Romanian words quoted there start with *ne*:

“necredință,” “nedreptate,” “neobrăzare,” “nerăbdare,” “neștiință,” “nevrednicie,” “nerecunoștință,” “nevirtute” (translator’s note).

16. Iorga, 93.
17. Ibid., 160.
18. Ibid., 181.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid., 116.
21. Ibid., 214.
22. Ibid., 162.
23. Ibid., 254.
24. Ibid., 282.
25. Ibid., 281.
26. Ibid., 280.
27. Ibid., 210.
28. Ibid., 278.
29. Ibid., 35.
30. Ibid., 148.
31. Ibid., 234.
32. Ibid., 207.
33. Ibid., 231.

Abstract

Romanian Moralists: Maiorescu and Iorga

This article approaches the moralist side of Titu Maiorescu and Nicolae Iorga. Maiorescu is the first Romanian moralist in the true sense of the word. Familiar with the ancient thinkers, the French moralists and the German moral philosophy, especially Schopenhauer, Maiorescu is an observer and a harsh judge of the mores of his society. Iorga, the most productive Romanian moralist, thinks of man, in full Romanian modernity, in terms of tradition (the *honest man*, with his purpose and respect for old rules, “ashamed” in his nature by the shamelessness of life). In his *Musings*, Iorga is always thinking of the *traditional man*, whom he wants to rescue from the *shamelessness of modernity*.

Keywords

Titu Maiorescu, Nicolae Iorga, moralist, aphorism, tradition, skepticism, modernity