

Ethic vs. Aesthetic

Coordinates of Revision in Cultural Journalism between 1990 and 1993

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THIS PAPER proposes an analysis of the literary heritage recodification dynamics during the Romanian communist period, with special focus on how the literary critics and cultural journalists' stances differed and the manner in which they evolved after 1989 with respect to the "reevaluation"/"revision" of the postwar autochthonous canon and the modification or preservation of the criteria lying at its basis.

In broad terms, on the one hand, there are the advocates of the preservation and perpetuation of the pre-1990 canon and the aesthetic autonomy thesis associated with it, who, along the lines of Titu Maiorescu (1840–1917) and E. Lovinescu (1881–1943), argue that the literature written under communism was a form of "resistance through culture," and that the built then canon is worth preserving, implying that the 1989 turn of events does not mean a game-changing milestone. On the other hand, we have the advocates of the more or less radical revision, of the pre-1990 values and the criteria supporting them, reaching the conclusion of overlapping the aesthetic criterion with the ethical one or even subordinating the former to the latter. In the last case, of importance is the writers' attitude towards the previous regime, their manifest or concealed collaborationism or, on the contrary, the resistance they were willing to oppose to the political entity. From a revisionist angle, literature functions as a document (confessions, memoirs, diaries, interviews etc.) and the authors operate as "witnesses" or "martyrs" of the occulted pre-1989 realities—"the saints of the prisons," the exiles, the blacklisted etc.—who call for the rewriting of the canon. Thus, non-fiction and its implicit relation with the ethic, moral rectitude or courage surpass fiction and its alliance with talent or the aesthetic. By deconstructing the classic Greek triad, beauty is no longer seen in correlation with the good or truth and the ones considered moral and courageous before 1990 become—from the canon revision supporters' perspective—the only ones able to deliver the truth about the communist era. Consequently, the ethic implies an intrinsic relation with the alethic (< Gr. *aletheia* = "truth"), the post-1989 Romanian literary life revolving to a large extent around the so-called, with a Foucauldian phrase,

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“politics of truth,” a prevalent phenomenon in the states of the ex-socialist bloc.¹ Both the advocates of the revision and the ones supporting the preservation of the canon and the pre-1990 criteria find a common ground in the premise that their activity under communism went against the then regime, that it was essentially anti-communist, the differences between them consisting only in their choice of the method used to demonstrate their lack of adherence to the regime’s policy.

Papers addressing the relation between ethic and aesthetic in the Romanian communist and post-communist era have been published time and time again.² As far as I am concerned, I have focused my investigation upon the literary journalism from the first decade of the post-communist era, specifically the first three years, for two reasons: 1. the press is the medium of immediate configuration and identification of sides and stances, being an appropriate ground for rapid and compact reaction; 2. the press ensures superior interconnectivity over other means of expressions with slower response time (literary histories, literary criticism collections, research papers etc.). Thus, I have found that, within a span of roughly three years after the fall of communism, the guidelines of the debates from the 1990 and 2000 critical culture were largely outlined: the conservative and revisionist nuclei put forward their own ideologies, which would, in turn, cause long term effects over the following decades, with the inherent position variations and reconfigurations.

Before I proceed to the actual analysis of the topic, I will integrate the Romanian case in the present international sociopolitical, critical, and theoretical context. Despite of its particularities, of being an (ex)communist state with a specific, even unique, background,³ what Romania experienced between 1980 and 2000 may be included into the capitalist “world-system.” This is the continuity thesis, according to which the transition from postmodernism (the 1980s) to post-postmodernism (the 2000s) was carried out without any major fractures in the global economic and sociopolitical landscape by bringing the global world-system represented by tertiary capitalism to its ultimate consequences, which affects to a similar extent (post)socialist economies as parts of the same “world-system.” For example, Immanuel Wallerstein argues that the year 1989 brought about a systemic crisis of capitalism itself, which the fall of the former socialist bloc did not significantly alter but contributed to its momentum. That is why, after 1989, the state capitalism of the European socialist countries aligned itself with to the neoliberal type economy without significant traumas, mimicking an apparent natural continuity: the modernization started under communism, that is, the industrial mode of production, would continue after 1989 through “echelon number two,” the successors of the former communists, converted without any spasms to the new religion of the free market.⁴ The world within communism or, more specifically, the state capitalism that defined it followed a pattern similar to the liberal-capitalist world. Between 1960 and 1980, in the international cultural sphere, a transition from aestheticism and criticism to the “knowledge turn” (cultural studies etc.) took place, which originated with the prominent figures of the left-wing movements and the fight for resources within universities. The study of literature should therefore be seen as a verifiable and quantifiable form of “knowledge production,” resulting in a turn toward scientism and the specialization of disciplines, which would nevertheless lead to depolitization, to the Left’s “quietism,” which is otherwise

too preoccupied with accurately describing reality instead of changing it. The promotion of multiculturalism, alterity, and diversity was interpreted not only as a left-wing policy, but also as a right-wing measure, a neoliberal measure of the 2000s designed to bring the Left around, the pro-alterity discourse being outlined in consonance with the market diversification project.⁵ From this point of view, the turn from aestheticism to anti-aestheticism or not-only-aestheticism, pervading the Romanian landscape after the fall of communism—i.e. the turn from aesthetic to the ethic and alethic—, would not constitute itself as a case peculiar to this country, given its communist past, but only an unsynchronized alignment with the global academic trend. For instance, the discourses on the “politics of truth” would therefore constitute a type of “knowledge production” in the communist period. Therefore, although the immediate reasons for the polarization of the post-1989 cultural life in Romania also had indisputable local issues, the phenomenon is not irreducible to the international cultural pulse; on the contrary: here as well, the anti-aestheticism came as an effect or hand in hand with neoliberalism, as an echo of the world-system bringing us all together.

However, there also is a seemingly opposite point of view—the discontinuity thesis—, according to which, after 1989, the states of the former socialist bloc experienced a traumatic paradigm shift as a result of the transition from socialism (state capitalism) to capitalism, symbolized by the free market. This criterion would dramatically differentiate them from the states lacking a socialist past in Europe and elsewhere. For instance, on a cultural level, an important difference would be the modification of the writer’s or man of letters’ (the literary critic included) status. After 1989, as Andrew Baruch points out, the writer would come to experience an acute decline of social prestige or, on the contrary, a normalization in relation with the hypertrophy suffered under communism, when the men of letters and literature itself were forced to take over the responsibilities of historians, sociologists, psychologists, anthropologists during a period marked by censorship and concealment: “East European literature . . . is no longer perceived to be as important as it once was . . . in socialist-era East European culture,” given the circumstances that “Eastern Europe is that part of the world where serious literature and those who produce it have traditionally been overvaluated.”⁶ According to the discontinuity thesis, the 1989 juncture is interpreted by the former socialist states as a rupture, occasioned by a unique situation: the collapse of socialism/communism identified with totalitarianism—i.e. the collapse of an antagonist of capitalism identified with democracy—, and not a systemic crisis of capitalism. Around 1989 and 1990, the former socialist states would then ignore the real dynamics of liberal-capitalism and its subsequent crisis. On an official discourse level, capitalism is still perceived as an eminently positive reference point, as a beacon of *vita nuova*.

The two theses, of continuity and discontinuity, do not necessarily preclude one another. Ex-socialist states operated along the logic of the capitalist world-system as well, although they displayed some particularities that generated unique reactions, scenarios, and interpretations. These include the excessive importance given to fiction writing in a society lacking freedom of speech and the writer’s “overvaluated” function and they suggest that 1989 was, in fact, a radical juncture, which led, in turn, to a paradigm shift. However, the models these writers deployed prior to 1990 were not limited to

the frontiers of the socialist bloc. Their literature—usually invested with critical or subversive power—drew inspiration from Western Europe and the two Americas, and also the critical discourse of that countries, irrespective of the immediate outcome of that discourse, sometimes even converting the critique of capitalism into one of local communism.⁷

I will continue to analyze the way the aesthetic/conservative pole vs. the ethic/revisionist one features in the literary press in the first years following the fall of the Romanian communist regime.

Immediately after 1989, an anti-communist discourse pervades all forms of media. Literary magazines are no exception. A vivid record of the communist heritage, the management of the existing archives, of the canon of values, the retrieval of missing data in the archives and of traumas produced by the former regime are fully reflected by the literary media. The fact that many of those entrusted with these endeavors following 1989 were writers and critics that participated in the establishment of the canon and the power struggles before 1990 only made the process more complicated. Against this new background, they were compelled to revisit their own discourse from the communist era in order to align themselves with the post-1989 anti-communist agenda, in the same way that, before 1990, in order to circumvent the (official or self-imposed) censorship, their discourse had to develop various mechanisms of matching the ideology of the regime in force at that specific moment.⁸ Under these circumstances, the two major stances—the revisionists and the conservatives of the pre-1990 canon—follow a classic dialectics modality: action vs. reaction. However, this polarization actually took place prior to the fall of communism; far from the eminently internal polarization that occurred after 1989, it had nonetheless already existed in various phases of crystallization, manifested in the opposition of the men of letters from the Socialist Republic of Romania toward their counterparts beyond the Romanian borders: the exiles. Thus, before 1990, the literature written under communism and the critics advocating it were often contested and accused of supporting the regime by important voices of the exile (Monica Lovinescu, Virgil Ierunca et al.) who were convinced that the genuine Romanian cultural life was practically non-existent (see Ioan Petru Culianu's famous phrase "the Siberia of the spirit"). Under these circumstances, "the action" and "reaction" following 1989 did not comply with the dialectics' own temporality (the action group proposes the thesis, the reaction group counteracts it with an antithesis), being expressed instead in relative synchronicity ever since the first months of 1990; the sides have already been defined to a large extent. Therefore, the order in which I will further present them should not be understood as a succession in time, but as a struggle from partially preconfigured positions, with the exile's voices ultimately merging with the revisionist groups coagulated in the country and legitimizing each other.

THE CONSERVATIVE segment, comprising major figures of the pre-1990 canon, such as Eugen Simion, Valeriu Cristea and others,⁹ advocates the perpetuation, with minimal mutations, of the existing canon (or of some part of it; it is the case of the critics from the 1980s, who only plead for the writers from their own group and the predecessors akin to them). For them, the literature written under communism remains

largely valuable, especially the one considered to have been validated from an aesthetic perspective, inherited from Maiorescu and Lovinescu. Their main argument is “the resistance through culture,” a concept according to which the culture and literature produced under communism do not represent monstrous typologies that depart from genuine art/culture (produced, for instance, under democracies) or, better put, abnormal forms as a consequence of their cohabitation with the regime, but expressions of authentic art, through which the regime not only failed to subordinate the autochthonous culture, but was itself undermined by it. Seen from this perspective, the aesthetic function appears as assimilated to the ethical one; a literature valuable as an artistic product is considered to have fulfilled its mission, even on a political and moral level, although it did not implicitly or explicitly position itself against the oppressor. Thus, after 30 December 1989, Simion continued to support the cause of the pre-1990 canon: “Romanian literature does not start from scratch.”¹⁰ It is a cause he also advocates in January 1990: “I want to defend the idea . . . that there has been a continuity of the Romanian spirit . . . There was a culture that went against the official culture.”¹¹ Furthermore, the *Caiete critice* (Critical Notebooks) also supported the “resistance through culture” thesis since its first issue in August 1990 through an article in which Cristea explicitly adopts the thesis of “resistance” through literature: “The institution of Romanian literature . . . permanently boycotted *through quality* . . . the dictator’s order of making it mediocre.” As for the enemies of the resistance through culture thesis, who would have preferred a “general cessation of writing” as the only efficient anti-regime policy, he argues that the writer “can only protest within its own writing and by its means. Under no circumstance and on no account, *has he the right not to write*.”¹² For Cristea, it is not writing under any circumstances, but quitting it altogether that constitutes a cowardly gesture, a form of desertion. Therefore, the writer’s task, and that of aesthetics in general, is inseparable from his role as a witness and a historian of the epoch. His statements betray the belief that, irrespective of how reprehensible it was, communism was not the absolute evil, a unique form of sociopolitical monstrosity, for “not even one epoch was devoid of injustice.” For Mircea Cărtărescu as well, the writer’s role should remain unchanged after 1989: under totalitarianism or democracy, his task was “to exorcize the evil,” which implies that this may happen in any type of political structure: “in the democratic world, the artist is an exorcist of evil, an anti-totalitarian, a participant in that collective *wisdom* outside which freedom cannot exist.”¹³ (Cărtărescu’s position seems to invalidate Wachtel’s thesis regarding the “abnormality” of the writer’s status under communism—which in this case is “overvaluated” because he is invested with functions that are refused to other bodies that could otherwise effectively deploy them.) The pro-“resistance through culture” project continues in the second issue of *Caiete critice*, where, in a joint article with Eugen Simion, Nicolae Breban asserts that “anybody who did his job well and conscientiously in the sphere of social good had de facto fought against dictatorship,” and Simion speaks openly of the “resistance through culture” under communism, which, throughout his career as a literary critic, he does not divorce from the aesthetic autonomy thesis. However, of particular importance in said issue is the inquiry entitled “the Resistance of literature,” which set out to uncover whether Romanian literature “surrendered” to or “opposed” the dictatorship and what specifically of what had been written “during the last 45 years” would stand the

test of time. The respondents were Marin Sorescu, Ștefan Aug. Doinaș, Monica Spiridon, Marta Petreu, Mircea Cărtărescu and others. By and large, all respondents agreed that literature did not “surrender” to communism, yet some nuances should be noted: Sorescu thinks that “poetry has always been at the forefront of the true literature and implicitly of resistance” and that theatre written then will last the best;¹⁴ Doinaș argues that “Romanian literature did not surrender to dictatorship, nor opposed it: it simply avoided it.”¹⁵ Spiridon distinguishes between two essential forms of resistance: “the direct resistance” (Paul Goma, Dorin Tudoran, Mircea Dinescu, Dan Petrescu, Luca Pițu, Liviu Antonesei, Mariana Marin) and the “defensive resistance,” which was preoccupied with “retrieving the values and gauges of our classic literature” and with the resistance “in tranches” or “underground.”¹⁶ Cărtărescu’s contribution is in tune with the others’, albeit excessively laudatory, marked by superlatives, where the words “resistance” and “continuity” are of main importance, although he dissociates himself from the then current opinions, a gesture characteristic for the ethos of the 1980s writers. For him, the novel that took it upon itself to describe the “obsessive decade” of 1950s,¹⁷ with the exception of some texts of genuine value, brought forth the degradation of literature following 1975, because “it grounded its popularity on the disclosure of some text, actions known to everybody, whereof one was not allowed to speak,” treating them in a “journalistic or sloppy” manner. Cărtărescu criticizes the poor aesthetic performances of the writers of the 1960s–1970s, whose low-quality literature competed with the works of the valuable writers and against which his generation had to fight.¹⁸ In the years that followed, *Caiete critice* continued to publish inquiries into the “resistance through culture” and the validity of the post-1989 aesthetic autonomy thesis, upon which Simion grounded his decision to steer away from any involvement in post-1989 politics, as others men of letters of that era¹⁹ did. The “aesthetic autonomy/ resistance through culture, ergo apoliticism” syllogism has been strongly contested by the revisionists, who see in it the perpetuation of a self-sufficient behavior before 1990 and the symptom of a hypocritical one after 1989—i.e. containing an implicit political position, on the so-called “neo-communist” side of President Ion Iliescu.

Among the advocates of the “resistance through culture” thesis, the authors of the 1980s generation constitute a peculiar case, since many of them were at the same time critics and theorists of their own literature. Their strategy was to eliminate a large share of the literature produced between 1960 and 1970 from the canon supposed to aesthetically “fare well” even after 1989 and to bring forth their own literature in the limelight of the “resistance.” The authors of the 1960s–1970s were invalidated not only against an aesthetic perspective, but also a moral one, for, in reality, they were tolerated or even encouraged by the system (the literature written “with police approval”). Therefore, it is not only Cărtărescu who points out the “degeneracy” brought forth by the literature of the authors from the 1960s, but also Gheorghe Crăciun, for whom the 1980s generation symbolizes the true progress, the “aesthetic, the openness, the iconoclastic spirit” as “unquestionable values, opposed to the official culture and propaganda.”²⁰ Within the ethics vs. aesthetics dichotomy, the 1980s generation considers itself aesthetic par excellence, familiar with the Western literary innovations, refined and skillful in their assimilation and application on Romanian ground. The “aesthetic courage” of the 1980s generation (as the bookish “escapism” of the authors of the Târgoviște

School) appears to Crăciun to be more subversive than Marin Preda's and Breban's. The model for this strategic option—the aesthetic as evolution/synchronization with the present literature and, implicitly, as an ethical, critical factor towards a restricting and outdated regime—is E. Lovinescu's "synchronist" ideology. Ion Bogdan Lefter has argued time and time again since the fall of communism that a prominent change in the Romanian writers' mentality took place not after 1989, but approximately a decade ago, through the literature of the 1980s, which qualifies as postmodernist.²¹ After the turn of the new millennium, the philosophy of the 1980s aestheticism as a potentially subversive discourse has also been contested by voices such as Ion Manolescu and the group of *Fracturi* (Fractures) magazine.

Given its effectiveness in the fight against the communist regime, the aesthetic is, according to these authors, the only viable solution to the fight against the harmful effects of the early post-communist capitalism, such as the invasion of commercial literature.²²

Some conclusions may be drawn from the cases analyzed: the supporters of the preservation of the communist canon share the common belief that the literature written before 1990 is, by and large, "resistant" even after the 1989 juncture. This thesis is perceived in consonance with the aesthetic autonomy thesis, under the premise that a literature valid from an aesthetic point of view becomes, by its nature, both ethical and pragmatic (implicitly operating as a form of subversion or as an anti-establishment discourse). After all, the differences among the "resistance through culture" supporters are equally important and suggest a schism, which, after the fall of the communist regime, would set the 1960s and 1980s representatives on quasi-irreconcilable positions. If for critics such as Simion and Cristea the authors prior to the 1980 decade are and will remain valid from an aesthetic point of view, in the case of the 1980s authors such as Lefter, Crăciun, and Cărtărescu, the aesthetic is a value present eminently in the literature of the 1980s, with anticipatory enclaves in the works of some authors of the 1970s (the Târgoviște School and others), unlike the "realist" novel devoted to the "obsessive decade" of 1950s, a genre considered to underperform from an aesthetic point of view and deemed questionable from an ethical one. Thus, the non-homogenous reception of the aesthetic concept and its autochthonous legacy *via* Maiorescu and Lovinescu made possible its circumstantial manipulation and its serving diametrically opposed purposes within the category of the "resistance through culture" supporters.²³

THE CATEGORY of the radical or moderate revisionists of the pre-1990 canon and principles that generated it is mobilized by an intense feeling of reparation and recovery of the values concealed during communism. Their enterprise supported the "politics of truth" trend mentioned previously, whereby the ethic implies, first and foremost, an alethic function (similar to psychoanalytical labor) of denouncing false reference points and encouraging the discovery of the "truth" of communism and the then produced or rejected values. This accounts for the fervent publication of non-fiction, invested with a documentary function instrumental to the recovery of facts during the communist regime and concealed by propaganda. The market comes to abound in confessions, diaries, memoirs—mainly depicting the years spent in detention—, historical records censored under communism (about the monarchy, the fascist move-

ment, territories under Soviet occupation, Bessarabia and Bukovina etc.), religious texts (mysticism, theology, the history of churches and clerical personalities in Romania), works of exiled authors, in other words, a complex series of materials supposed to contribute to the rewriting of Romania's real history and its recent past. The influx of trauma and compensation literature is driven by the belief that no fiction, no novel is more powerful than the genuine detention literature. That non-fiction fares better than fiction is tantamount to saying that ethical works fare better than the aesthetic ones, for "what drawer literature could parallel the confessions of the ones finding themselves in the stone or concrete drawer of our history?"²⁴ The "cult of martyrology" and "the narcissist memory," excessively oriented towards the damage made to the self, is otherwise a symptom of the states newly emerged from under the communist rule.²⁵

If before 1990 the aesthetic seemed the only honorable possibility in order to resist under communism, to circumvent/to provoke the political power and to supply the absence of a disobedient political, historical or sociological discourse, after 1989 the aesthetic comes to be perceived by the enemies of the conservative pole as more of an alibi of the authors' moral inconsistency. The aesthetic is assimilated to the protest not having a really efficient value, hence the frustration of the revisionists when comparing the circumstances in communist Romania with the ones in the other former communist states, Czechoslovakia, Poland etc., where the protests were more courageous. Moreover, they also incriminate the fetishism of the aesthetical heritage *via* Maiorescu and Lovinescu (considered guilty of methodological and conceptual desynchronization with the contemporaneous West) and the blindness towards other types of cultural discourse. The critical perspective of the canon made under communism and of the aesthetic as an alibi for quietism and partisanship with the regime is shared by all revisionists. *Vatra* (Târgu-Mureș) and *Apostrof* (Cluj) magazines can be taken as bastions of revisionism in the 1990s, and their mottos could have been: "The censorship restricted *truth*, not *beauty*" (Paul Goma²⁶) or "As if you needed talent in order to oppose Ceaușescu!" (Mircea Martin²⁷). Talent and beauty—the active ingredients of the aesthetic autonomy theory—are now fading into the background. The aesthetic is no longer perceived as naturally containing the ethic; on the contrary, it is to be observed that the aesthetic is, most of the time, assimilated with cowardice, being indifferent, collaboration with the regime. At some point, Goma mocked the vacuous "communal aesthetics" and "regional" culture of Romanian literature under the communism as provincialism or a complex of inferiority.²⁸ For the supporters of canon revision, the parameters of the guiding concepts have been inverted: not everything that is aesthetic is ethical, but everything that is ethical is aesthetic. (However, even radicals such as Goma do not bring to the ultimate consequence the thesis of the "Siberia of the spirit": something has been done in Romania as well, but not enough, not like in other countries.) Among the specific actions of the revision supporters a special place is held by the positioning of Goma and his literature in the cultural life's limelight. The "Goma complex" of the Romanian authors was discussed in articles time and time again, quasi-sanctifying Goma, imagining him in a Hegelian manner as "the moral idea" in motion, "witness and martyr at the same time" (Al. Cistelean²⁹). Marta Petreu went further with the denunciation of the aesthetic unsuitability, commenting that Goma's works "advance, first and foremost, an ethical

type of reaction” and that it “seems almost an insult to interpret them in an aesthetic register.”³⁰ “East-ethics,” a term coined by Norman Manea, is the new word of order trying to capture the paradoxes and particularities of the literature from the former socialist states. The framework of the “east-ethic” revisionism is mostly construed on the foundation of Goma’s percussive statements, which were also supported by his own moral example. Monica Lovinescu is another moral yardstick promoted by the revisionist group. She is sure that the communist gamble on the aesthetic was a losing hand, and, moreover, is guilty of the lack of coagulation of a civil society in Romania,³¹ while rejecting the Romanian communism “abnormality” thesis, its monstrosity, which has been used by some followers of the “resistance through culture” in order to justify their own lack of direct reaction. Her critique is all the more acid as it neutralizes the exceptionalist justifications along the lines of “nowhere else in Eastern Europe has writing been so good in so harsh conditions.”³² A voice of the exile in favor of revisionism is that of I. Negoïtescu, who argues that “by reacting only aesthetically, we did not understand our civic duty, we did not grab the bull by the horns.”³³

In parallel with the restitution of Goma, inquiries into the opportunity of the revision of the communist canon were carried out, lists of valid and reprehensible authors or considered obsolete after 1989 were compiled etc. The cathartic effect, the “temptation of purification,” seems to be the motto of this type of endeavors, symmetrical to the inquiries regarding the “resistance through culture” from *Caiete critice*. For instance, in May 1991, *Apostrof* initiates an inquiry concerning the “evaluation criteria of contemporary Romanian literature” from the perspective of the post-1989 revision. The answers vacillate between moderation (Mircea Zăciu, Petru Dumitriu, Adrian Marino and others) and revisionist vehemence. Among the latter, Gheorghe Grigurcu’s opinion is worth noting, as it advocates the “decisive importance of the ethic criterion in the evaluation of the men of letters, in the process of sanctioning their behavior from the perspective of their authorial and civic attitude.”³⁴ He would go on to extend his revisionist project, which drew on E. Lovinescu’s “revision” theory, through a series of articles published in the 1990s in *România literară* (Literary Romania), and in collections as well. Grigurcu’s focus is on the type of the intellectual represented by Eugen Simion, being accused of having mutilated the Lovinescian legacy by supporting the promotion of apoliticism in alliance with the aesthetic autonomy.³⁵

The literature of exile is integrated in the same logic of restitution and the impact it might have on the rewriting of the recent literary history is examined. For instance, Mircea Iorgulescu believes in the reformatory function of the literature of exile (“for the younger critics *revision* is a natural condition”³⁶), while Dan Culcer takes into account the danger of “overestimating the political value of the exile writers and of the restricted ones.”³⁷ Associated with the theme of recovering exile literature is also the restoration of the relations with Bessarabia, starting with the literature written there. In this context, the aesthetic autonomy thesis is again seen as unproductive, a relic of a past no longer resourceful, which could become potentially toxic.³⁸

On a different note, but still concerning the usefulness of the revision of the criteria and principles underlying the pre-1990 canon, Sorin Alexandrescu pointed out the self-sufficiency of the so-called “aesthetic” critique, whose historical usefulness he finds

along the T. Maiorescu–Nicolae Manolescu axis, but whose quasi-exclusivism after 1989 in Romania he tackles on the grounds that the cultural market of the last decades has diversified its range of options.³⁹ Alexandrescu’s position—favorable to a “methodological pluralism”—followed the common Western trend of the day, the so-called “knowledge turn” mentioned previously.

Therefore, the revisionists’ shared belief is that 1989 should be treated as a real juncture that generated considerable mutations, that Romanian literary history cannot be written anymore as it was before, i.e. by avoiding to take into account the ethical aspect or by assimilating it to the aesthetic one. Briefly, the idea is as follows: “1989 has removed the ideological protection some works (worthless ones) benefited from during communism” (Gheorghe Perian⁴⁰).

If, up to this point, I have focused on the differences between the supporters of the pre-1990 canon preservation and the advocates of its revision, it should be noted that, aside from the anti-communist principles common to both categories, there is another element where they find common ground: the recourse to aestheticism is seen by both parties as a symptom associated with or generated by the “abnormality” specific to a totalitarian regime (national-communism), considered to have altered the “normal” environment of production and consumption of literature in the free world. Both parties share the impression that, under the conditions of Romanian communism (considered an exceptional case among the states of the former socialist bloc), the aesthetic played an “abnormal,” “unnatural,” excessive, and circumstantial role, which was the only solution for the survival of the local culture. In turn, this impression is based on the idea that there is a “natural” aesthetic or literature, specific to democracies—*qua* normal, healthy societies—and an “unnatural” aesthetic or literature, produced in exceptional, toxic sociopolitical conditions. Starting from this common core of discussion—the aesthetic as an umbrella for bad weather—the revision advocates believe that the perpetuation of the aesthetic view should, however, be tempered after 1989, while the supporters of the preservation of pre-1990 values continue to believe in the quasi-exclusive aestheticism’s ability to guide the nation’s cultural life. It is against this background that the (ab)normality of literature’s aesthetic function under communism emerges, to which Wachtel refers in the cited fragment. Among the examples discussed above, only Cărtărescu believes that the writer is endowed with the role of an evil exorcist *in any type of regime*, while the other Romanian writers set out, in the immediate aftermath of 1989, to ease the “abnormally” heavy workload the fiction writing had under communism. Thus, for novelist Augustin Buzura the time of literature comes when “the writer is not forced to do everything, to be, at the same time, a historian, sociologist, journalist, and the clock on the city hall.”⁴¹ Ana Blandiana shares his perspective, but is not confident that writer’s workload will get any easier after 1989, since the role of latter would then be that of compensating for the lack of politicians.⁴² The absence of a non-communist political class capable of guaranteeing the wellbeing of post-1989 Romania prompts Nicolae Manolescu to suspend his activity as a literary critic in order to become involved in politics, more specifically in a center-right formation. Wachtel’s perspective on the writers’ and literature’s role under communism is thus confirmed by statements and initiatives made by Buzura, Blandiana, and Manolescu. However, there are voices that turn this thesis of com-

munist “abnormality” into a parochial advantage: the excessive importance given to literature and poetry in particular is thought to have had a positive effect on the community, encouraging their preservation in the communist states. Thus, the East still enjoyed values the West had already lost and, as a consequence, as long as it speaks the language of poetry, the East will be the “civilized” one, not the West. Adrian Popescu, himself a poet, shares this belief and noted that Eastern authors (Mircea Dinescu, Ana Blandiana, Ion Caraion) are perceived by the West only through the lens of the “political criterion,” of the “opposition towards the communist regime,” while poetry, as a literary genre, enjoys a more unfortunate fate in the free West than in the totalitarian East: “By itself, the lyrical exercise is considered as a luxury in the West. It is different here, in an East that is thirsty for culture and civic courage, for the liberty people beyond the [Iron] Curtain had.”⁴³ The problem is that, by eliminating the need for a hypertrophied literature and a factotum writer, it is not necessarily the promise of a “normal” literature that appears on the horizon (supposing there is an portrait of it), but one of a literature in the process of eradication: either the market no longer needs the “truths” of the qualitative fiction, or commercial literature drains the resources wherein the qualitative literature had put its hopes. Therefore, the transition to market economy did not bring about a “normal” literature comparable ratio-wise to the “abnormal” one under communism, yet it subjected the literature to the strict regulations of the market, as it happens all over the capitalist world.

It should therefore be noted, in relation to the thesis regarding the (ab)normality in literature’s and writers’ status under communism that, both before 1990 and after the fall of communism, writers and literary critics have become increasingly aware that their works are an eternal substitute for discourses and typologies that have been found unreliable in one context or the other, that they are forced to fill in for historians, sociologists, journalists, and politicians. What do Romanian writers discover when they are permitted to “finally delve into themselves” (Blandiana), after having been compelled for so long to fulfill tasks that are not their own? They find out that they have been denied some of the most important topics of authorial interest; they discover that they now lack prestige and consistency (among the really successful writers before 1990, only a mean share of them actually enjoy a flourishing literary career). The fact that the writer’s craft has its own themes, different from the ones of politics/civics etc., turned out to be an illusion and many of the active writers during the communist regime later came to the painful realization that playing the more or less *undercover* role of historians, political scientists, philosophers, journalists of the communist era was not so bad a part after all—that they cannot, in fact, be something else. The essence of their writing seems to be exactly that: a discourse of substitution by means of specific mechanisms. Realistic history, realistic sociology, realistic journalism—fiction at least as real and as persuasive as reality itself.



Notes

1. Gáspár Miklós Tamás: “The politics of truth . . . is more than the suppression of censorship: it was a call for a merciless exposition of the hidden history of crimes committed by the dictatorship.” “The Left and Marxism in Eastern Europe: An Interview with Gáspár Miklós Tamás by Imre Szeman,” *Meditation: Journal of the Marxist Literary Group* 24, 2 (Spring 2009). Also see G. M. Tamás, *Postfascism și anticomunism: Intervenții filosofico-politice*, transl. Teodora Dumitru and Attila Szigeti (Cluj-Napoca: Tact, 2014), 156.
2. For the general phenomenon of post-1989 Romanian revisionism, see Nicoleta Sălcudeanu, *Revizuire și revizionism în literatura postcomunistă* (Bucharest: Editura Muzeul Național al Literaturii Române, 2013); for the inclusion of the revisionist theme in the identity-related general theme, see Nicoleta Ifrim, *Identitate culturală și integrare europeană* (Galați: Europlus, 2011); for the post-war and post-communist investigation of the use of E. Lovinescu’s legacy, see Eugen Simion, *Posteritatea critică a lui E. Lovinescu* (Bucharest: Tracus Arte, 2017).
3. After 1989, the myth of Romanian communism’s exceptionalism created the paradox of the development of a strongly anti-communist discourse under the circumstances of a recent past perceived as lacking any real communism. Andrei Pleșu: “I believe that Romania actually lacked any real communist over the past 25–30 years”: *Cronologia vieții literare românești: Perioada postcomunistă*, ed. Eugen Simion, vol. 3, 1992 (Bucharest: Editura Muzeul Național al Literaturii Române, 2014), 264 (hereafter cited as *CVLR*). This image of a communism lacking communists, of the spectres of the “comrades” that continue to behave as such, yet are devoid of any substance alludes to the *Invasion of Body Snatchers* cinema production: Boris Groys, *Post-scriptumul comunist*, transl. Maria-Magdalena Anghelescu (Cluj-Napoca: Idea Design & Print, 2009), 62–63. According to Pleșu, the “comrades” appear as empty, false, robotic specters, but not because communism annihilated their humanity, but because they are lacking in communist substance. If Groys’ “specters” lose their humanity in order to become communist, i.e. a perfect rationalist, Pleșu’s “specters” are subjects to a double process of nullifying: they lose not only their humanity, but the robotic element, the contract of communist “robotization” as well. They are forms-without-a-project.
4. See Tamás, *Postfascism*.
5. For a more detailed perspective of these evolutions in the sphere of culture, theory and Anglo-American literary criticism, see Jeffrey T. Nealon, *Post-Postmodernism: or, The Cultural Logic of Just-in-Time Capitalism* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2012), and Joseph North, *Literary Criticism: A Concise Political History* (Cambridge, Massachusetts-London: Harvard University Press, 2017).
6. Andrew Baruch Wachtel, *Remaining Relevant after Communism: The Role of the Writer in Eastern Europe* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006), 2, 4.
7. See Teodora Dumitru, “Gaming the World-System: Creativity, Politics, and Beat Influence in the Poetry of the 1980s Generation,” in *Romanian Literature as World Literature*, eds. Mircea Martin, Christian Moraru, and Andrei Terian (New York–London–Oxford–New Delhi–Sydney: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 271–287.
8. See Teodora Dumitru, “Strategii de promovare a poeziei românești cu potențial subversiv în anii 1980,” *Philologica Jassyensia* 12, 2 (24) (2016): 67–84.
9. The literary critics associated with *România literară* weekly usually known, before 1990, for their support of the aesthetic autonomy thesis, which went against the nationalist-protochronist groups associated with *Săptămâna* (The Week) and *Luceafărul* (The Morning Star).
10. *CVLR* 1, 1990 (Bucharest: Editura Muzeul Național al Literaturii Române, 2014), 8.
11. *Ibid.*, 14.

12. Ibid., 414.
13. Ibid., 415.
14. Ibid., 505.
15. Ibid., 506.
16. Ibid.
17. A decade that has been associated, on a socio-political level, with the multiplication of Stalinist type measures (arrests, deportations, executions, the beginning of forced collectivization etc.) and, on a literary level, with the imposition of socialist realism as the single literary method tolerated by the regime. The “obsessive decade” phrase was suggested by the post-war novelist Marin Preda.
18. *CVLR* 1: 507. For a synthesis of Cărtărescu’s ideas regarding this aspect, see Mircea Cărtărescu, *Postmodernismul românesc* (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1999).
19. For a synthesis of Simion’s conception, see Simion, 245–421.
20. Gheorghe Crăciun, “Generațiile între etic și estetic,” *România literară* (Bucharest), 39–40 (13–19 October 1993), 3.
21. *CVLR* 2, 1991 (Bucharest: Editura Muzeul Național al Literaturii Române, 2014), 362.
22. For instance, Alex Ștefănescu is in favour of the revival of aesthetic or qualitative writing as a unique measure of protection against commercial drift (*CVLR*, 1: 585).
23. For the evolution of the concept of the aesthetic in Romania and for debunking the idea that the aesthetic tradition continues well after 1989, see Mihai Iovănel, *Ideologiile literaturii în postcomunismul românesc* (Bucharest: Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române, 2017), 99–107.
24. Alexandru Vlad, in *CVLR* 2: 526.
25. See Clara Royer and Petra James, eds., *Sans faucille ni marteau: Ruptures et retours dans les littératures européennes post-communistes*, Nouvelle poétique comparatiste/New Comparative Poetics (Bruxelles–Bern–Berlin–Frankfurt am Main–New York–Oxford–Vienna, Peter Lang, 2013), 297.
26. *CVLR* 3: 309.
27. Ibid., 308.
28. Ibid., 435.
29. *CVLR* 2: 277.
30. *CVLR* 1: 420.
31. *CVLR* 2: 44.
32. Mircea Cărtărescu, in *CVLR* 1: 507.
33. *CVLR* 2: 164.
34. Ibid., 278–279.
35. For details pertaining to Grigurcu’s revisionist project, see Andrei Terian, *Critica de export: Teorii, contexte, ideologii* (Bucharest: Editura Muzeul Național al Literaturii Române, 2013), 195–211.
36. *CVLR* 2: 528.
37. *CVLR* 3: 114.
38. *CVLR* 2: 164.
39. “He who now is a foul capitalist, in a hundred years from now, will open a museum and will be considered a father of the nation.” Sorin Alexandrescu, *Vatra* (Târgu-Mureș), new. ser., 3, 6 (June 1992).
40. *CVLR* 3: 473.
41. *CVLR* 1: 583–584.
42. *CVLR* 2: 215.
43. *CLVR* 3: 219.

Abstract

Ethic vs. Aesthetic: Coordinates of Revision in Cultural Journalism between 1990 and 1993

This paper analyses how the post-war autochthonous canon revision and the modification or preservation of the criteria underlying the latter's constitution polarized post-1989 literary journalists and critics' opinions. The supporters of preservation and perpetuation of the aesthetic criterion proclaim that the Romanian communist literature was a form of "resistance through culture" and that, consequently, the canon then built should be conserved along with the aesthetic autonomy thesis considered as its basis. On the other hand, the advocates of the more radical or moderate revision of the pre-1990 scale of values and the criteria that created it believe in the overlap between the aesthetic criterion and the ethical one or even in the subordination of the former to the latter. In this last case, of importance is the writers' attitude towards the former regime, their open or concealed collaborationism or, on the contrary, the resistance they managed to oppose to the political element.

Keywords

ethic, aesthetic, pragmatic, literary criticism, revision, canon, communism, post-communism, capitalism