

Theory in the Flesh of Practice: Anecdote and Portraits in the Histories of Romanian Literature

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1. The Epistemological Benefits of Showing One's True Colors

DEPARTING FROM Hayden White's well-known assumption concerning the fact that any historiographic endeavor is drawing on archetypal plot structures,¹ we hypothesize that *the anecdote*—as disruptive and incidental microstructure,² as stock-phrase content that is highly dependent on its scene of transmission,³ as *memorabilia* encoded in specific gestures of literary life⁴—has played a fundamental role in the making of both canonical and less canonical histories of Romanian literature.

In what follows, we will try to look beyond the strong theoretical claims these histories bring in and search for their true “narrative vocation.”⁵ As long as we accept, in line with Paul Veyne, that the concept of “subjectivity” does not belong with idealism but with nominalism,⁶ a historian's style (*l'écriture*), his/her manner of conveying referential reality or simply “his/her literary aspirations”—all the more, the literary historian's *écriture*—have overt methodological aims. Looking at things from this angle, a nominalist conception applied to the (Romanian) histories of literature can yield a sure “epistemological benefit.”⁷ It allows us to understand how the illusions of the literary historian—in fact, “the illusions”⁸ and “the complexes”⁹ of an entire literary tradition, have not lead to a despicable beguilement of positively structured facts but to the enrichment of our literary past and to the (sensuous) pleasure we derive from it. The emergence of hybrid genres such as “theory in the flesh of practice,”¹⁰ *textes-recherches*¹¹ or *creative (literary) histories* has been spurred by our literary historians' engagement with formal experiment, with renewing the old fictions concerning historiographical methods. Overall, the “epistemological benefit” seems to be proportional with the emotional investment on the literary researcher's side, with his/her desire to yield a response from readers.

In a previous essay, we focused on the “monumental” history authored by G. Călinescu (1899–1965) and made a motion for its re-evaluation as “a monument of petty things” rather than as a grandiose monolith.¹² Indeed, light has been shed especially on the resid-

ual elements, which, although brushed aside by our literary theorists and historians,¹³ play a dramatic role in the way both G. Călinescu's history (1941) and the histories delivered by declared and non-declared followers have been read and interpreted within the Romanian literary tradition. It is now time to evaluate how much of Călinescu's innate anecdotal spirit and how much of his taste for portraits have been transferred to later literary historians such as I. Neșoiu (1921–1993) and Mihai Zamfir (b. 1940).

Just in passing, let us remark that G. Călinescu's emphasis on the constitution of the Romanian identity—the ethno-psychological theory of *the national specificity*—has been taken very seriously only by Edgar Papu (1908–1993). Papu's positivist approach to his forerunner's theory of truth would only result into a caricatured version of the original model. Indeed, protochronism is a development of Călinescu's *organicism*¹⁴ aimed at proving that the Romanians have anticipated all European creations and inventions! Other literary historians such as E. Lovinescu, I. Neșoiu, and Mihai Zamfir take up from G. Călinescu—sometimes without even being aware of it—the eavesdropping habit, the pleasure for fictional making-up, the art of entertaining the reader with a romance-kind suspense. As Paul Veyne notices, “history is [always] anecdotal, it interests by recounting, as the novel does. It differs from the novel on only one essential point . . . the history . . . can afford to be boring without losing its value.”¹⁵ The truth is that neither novels, nor histories (of literature or else) can really afford to be boring!

Leaving aside Edgar Papu's protochronism, the exploration of the aforementioned cases can prove that, more than on positive science, the histories of Romanian literature are counting chiefly on the art of the portrait and on a highly developed anecdotal spirit, which enables abstractions to take the shape of “pathetic formulas,”¹⁶ and thus to be channeled through to the readers. Usually, the majority of post-Călinescu critics prefers to deliver “concurrent,” “co-existent,” and “co-extensive” histories of the Romanian literature,¹⁷ branded as “alternative panoramas” (Mihai Zamfir) or as “(delayed) histories” that have missed their moment of glory because of political interference (I. Neșoiu). Fortunately, they spare their readers the misery of advancing through footnotes¹⁸ and the boredom of always keeping an eye on the historical timeline. Biographical bits, portraits and spicy stories are delivered as “events,” yet without “the framing context of historical successivity.”¹⁹ Instead of erudite footnotes that would multiply the layers or postpone the reader's sensuous grasp on the text's areas of density, these literary historians prefer to collate citations with personal considerations. Instead of a harsh *probatio system* (footnotes, bibliography, annexes), they find strategies to integrate casual remarks, questions or parenthetical comments.²⁰ Since the writers' genuine creativity as well as the critic's own creativity are evaluated according to one's capacity of existential engagement, the predominant literary *forms* are interpreted, most of the times, as *Pathosformeln* (*pathos-formulas*),²¹ as “heightened emotional gestures,” that preexist artistic agency and become effective only through contact with “the selective will” of a particular period.²² The figures and biographies of writers come out from the historical and social background, as *dynamograms* that encapsulate a force of both regression and higher knowledge.

2. When Biography Abstracts Itself to a Portrait: The Concept of “Biography” Throughout the History of Romanian Literature

BEFORE GHEORGHE Adamescu²³ (1869–1942) and Nicolae Iorga²⁴ (1871–1940) published their own histories of Romanian literature—which would open a path for E. Lovinescu’s and G. Călinescu’s historiographic syntheses, the first pioneering systematizations came from Al. Philippide²⁵ (1859–1933), V. A. Urechia²⁶ (1834–1901) and Aron Densusianu²⁷ (1837–1900). But the concept of “national literature” gained a strong impetus only with Aron Pumnul’s *Lepturariul...* (1862–1863), Iosif Vulcan’s *Panteonul român* (1869) and Vasile Gr. Pop’s *Conspect asupra literaturii române și literațiilor ei de la început și până astăzi* (1875), which pushed out in the open *figures* and *lives* of genuine Romanian writers. However, until the literary circle Junimea (The Youth) was founded (1863), a writer’s social and professional status was rather easy to accede to. As a matter of fact, Titu Maiorescu (1840–1917), who acted as a leading critical voice during the second half of the 19th century, reproached Aron Pumnul that, excessively interested in unconventional biographical details, he compiled and promoted authors and texts without any aesthetic criterion.²⁸ Like Mihail Kogălniceanu (1817–1891), Maiorescu strongly believed that the critic’s mission was “to judge the work [of art] and not the person [who authors the work of art].”²⁹ Maiorescu and Kogălniceanu’s aestheticism represented a natural step back from the cult of great personalities, which had been imported from the ideologies of romanticism and had been spread through the agency of intellectuals engaged in the revolutionary movements of 1848: Nicolae Bălcescu (1819–1852), C. A. Rosetti (1816–1885), Simion Bărnuțiu (1808–1864), Vasile Alecsandri (1821–1890), Costache Negri (1812–1876), Ion Heliade Rădulescu (1802–1872), Dimitrie Bolintineanu (1819–1872), Alecu Russo (1819–1859), and others.

Yet, this purist approach to national literature was itself soon turned into an exaggeration. In his turn, Constantin Dobrogeanu-Gherea (1855–1920) tried to correct Maiorescu’s judicial spirit and, for the first time in our cultural history, to connect Romanian criticism to the theories and ideas that were circulating within the Western literary traditions at that time (for instance, feminism).³⁰ In actual terms, the emergence of Alexandru Macedonski (1854–1920) and of other modernist poets at the end of 19th century represented a moment of true synchrony with the great literary traditions of Western Europe. It was not by chance that Gherea and Macedonski would return to the merits of 1848 intellectuals, chiefly on Ion Heliade Rădulescu’s project of developing the cultural press at *Curierul românesc*, transmitted further through the politics of *Literatorul* journal.³¹

The interest taken in *Life* and “*lives*,” in anecdotes and portraits, proves to be an epi-phenomenon of the romantic ideology re-branded by the writers that emerged at the end of the 19th century. It was a way to hail *originality* as an expression of the irreducible individuality, of the nation, of “the genius;” it was a solution to uphold a relativist perspective, counting on humanist values, and to reject dogmatism and formalism. Echoes of this approach to life and literature were ebbing from Sainte-Beuve’s

criticism, which claimed that a writer's biography would provide literature with the only valid insight. The French critic also emphasized the fact that, in the two-century history of literary criticism, the biographical approach represents the first and the most fertile hermeneutical model. But this change of approach also understates that criticism is an essentially creative activity, rooted in the critic's *imaginativeness*, be that called "critical imagination"³² or "historical imagination."³³ As leading faculty in criticism, *imaginativeness* seems to develop on the ability to appreciate and to express *appreciation of* uncompleted or surcharged destinies,³⁴ of lives with blank spots or with a stylized and heightened movement.

If Maiorescu offered an idealist reading of art by stressing *gratuity* and *transfiguration*, his opponent Constantin Dobrogeanu-Gherea believed that, on the contrary, art and artists should keep their anchors in reality. Moreover, the artists should endeavor to act as educators and ethical models for the masses.³⁵ Although his critical culture and lexis does not stand comparison with Maiorescu's, although his texts exude a scent of newspaper haste and improvisation, Dobrogeanu-Gherea should still be considered our first modern literary critic. His direct follower was G. Ibrăileanu (1871–1936), whose re-iterated idea on one's way "of looking at Life" would grow into a theory of "complete criticism,"³⁶ which involves an art of tracing the movements of Life on the surface of texts.

E. Lovinescu (1881–1943) moved a step ahead and reconciled Maiorescu's and Gherea's positions by assuming that "aesthetic values" are not absolute and can undergo "mutations." Yet, the attraction to anecdote and portrait is obvious in Lovinescu's texts too. For instance, in his book entitled *Istoria literaturii române contemporane* (The history of contemporary Romanian literature), the critic picked up his illustrative examples according to "an aesthetic criterion" (even if "aesthetic values" are, as he himself claimed, relative, mutable and context-dependable) and according to "the *mystique* of literary genres."³⁷ It is interesting that the portraits of writers and related anecdotes were displaced from the history of Romanian literature to another literary genre, *the memoirs*. The literary historian and leader of Sburătorul circle often drew attention to the tight relationship between his history and his memoirs, the latter serving as a sort of *background* (biographies, portraits, literary life, social and cultural context) for the historical plot in the foreground. For obvious reasons, G. Călinescu reversed background and foreground, the densest focal points of his own history being the writer's portraits and the accompanying illustrations (photographs chosen by the critic himself). Instead of a probation system built on bibliography and footnotes, he provided his own (textual) history with a concurrent, co-existent, and co-extensive visual history, a story made up of illustrations. As Adrian Marino aptly noticed, only with Călinescu "the issue of biography starts to be debated seriously in Romanian literature."³⁸

3. G. Călinescu and the Prestige of Biography

INSPIRED BY Benedetto Croce's aesthetics and philosophy, Călinescu used to appreciate literature, irrespective of formal distinctions, as a *sui generis* expression of the writer's personality. The critic's approach was thus monist, integrative, broadly speaking, humanist. Indeed, the Renaissance humanism was particularly influential in his case. As a student of The Romanian School of Rome, he spent some time in the capital of Italy and could appreciate, at slow pace, the beauty and perfection of aesthetic achievements. Thus, Călinescu never considered either literature or art as autonomous realities, severed from Life. In his opinion, a writer's life and work form one single monad, and the true critic is called to decipher the (secret) meaning of this enclosed figure.

An obvious preference for portraits as both structured biographical data and method of investigation indicates that Călinescu fosters his *sense of appreciation* and critical *imaginativeness* by looking for his subjects' troubled facial expressions, heightened emotional gestures, by looking for "pathetic formulas." Commenting on a literary work means to aim at pulling out *the writer's portrait* from a background of amorphous matter. Somehow, this is a biography à rebours, because the writer's work justifies the critic's (selfish) aspiration to get a good portrait out of it. More than anything else, the great synthesis entitled *Istoria literaturii române de la origini până în prezent* (The history of Romanian literature from origins to the present) is built by laying portrait-blocks one over the other. Finally, the archetypal plot that upholds this big family picture is the theory of "the national specificity." However, let us notice that, compared to Lovinescu's strategy, Călinescu moves theory to the background, while the faces are drawn in the front. More than by their belonging to the same "national specificity," Călinescu's subjects appear to be bound by blood-ties. Reinforced by the frame of "the national specificity," the critic's genealogic and heraldic interests lead him to minimize foreign influences and to establish filiations exclusively within the enclosed space of the Romanian literary tradition.

Previously, we have remarked that even referential documents and facts go through a process of fictionalization in Călinescu's history, which inevitably forces a comparison between the critic's biographical method and his aspirations as a novelist.³⁹ While, Călinescu states, the biographer must choose enhanced personalities and exceptional people, the novelist should be preoccupied with the canonical humankind, expressed in typologies, stock phrases and stereotypes. But biography also parts with novel on another aspect. Whereas the biographer recreates a past life and things belonging to the past (the true biography, Călinescu claims, starts with one's year of death and not with one's year of birth), the novelist focuses on present times and strives to perceive what is typological in a fast-moving, unsteady social and historical background. In both cases, novelist and biographer deliberately endeavor to generalize, somehow in the manner that portrait painters behave when they do not have a real model to draw after. If we compare for instance *Viața lui Eminescu* (Mihai Eminescu's biography) and *Cartea nunții* (The wedding book, Călinescu's first novel), we notice that in both cases the author displays great imaginativeness by pasting in both stories a ready-made social observation and ready-made characters. As for the epical matter that surrounds the portrait-isles, this is

mainly anecdotal and sensational, very much in the fashion of pulp romances. On numerous occasions, Călinescu confesses that, like Balzac and Dostoevsky, he is attracted to popular novels, chiefly to the “city mysteries,” whose typical plot is also embedded in one of our founding novels, *Ciocoii vechi și noi* (Old and new boyars). Nicolae Filimon (1819–1865), the author of this text, would turn out to be a perfect subject for one of Călinescu’s late monographs.

In spite of its apparent relationship with biographical criticism, the literary historian has mixed feelings concerning anecdote. E. Lovinescu’s and Cezar Petrescu’s literary productions are marred, the critic believes, by an abusive use of it. Nevertheless, the narrative and visual efficacy of anecdote is somehow acknowledged through Călinescu’s own practice. To be sure, the critic’s novels evince an undeniable theatrical air, resembling baroque *farces* or *masques*.⁴⁰ All fictional characters are meant “to play” and evolve according to the latent features that are already inscribed, from the very beginning, in their inaugural portraits. The biographies authored by the critic reflect a similar strategy of narrowing exceptions to portraiture stereotypes or the other way round. As a novelist and biographer, Călinescu frames the moments when man’s gesticulation is enhanced by strong emotions and experiences: birth (with its corollaries—family and heredity), love, creation, possession, death. Only one step separates such broad similarities between novel and biography and, eventually, the critic’s majestic claim that one’s biography is as “fictional” as one’s literary work.⁴¹ So, Călinescu does not shy away from interpreting both high and low-brow literature in a referential key, the aim always being... a good and memorable portrait. Symmetrically, one’s literary work should be treated as the most reliable existential document.

Had he obediently followed the line drawn by Croce and by his *personalism*, G. Călinescu would have been forced to ascertain the death of literary history as genre. Great works emerge as expressions of genial creativity, thus they cannot be either serially linked or integrated into an evolutionary script. Yet the Romanian critic prefers to conceal the ends of his methodological options. Instead of saying farewell to this genre, he proposes a “creative literary history,” the history of Romanian literature as a work of art *sui generis*, mythological and personal at the same time, an epic synthesis and a sensational romance built up of portrait bricks.

4. Following G. Călinescu: I. Negoïtescu and the Limits of Aestheticism

FAR FROM relying on anti-national, de-mythologizing and anti-aesthetic innuendoes (as it has been argued after its publication), I. Negoïtescu’s *Istoria literaturii române* (1991) proposes a re-interpretation of our literary past by combining E. Lovinescu’s idea of ethical (self)-“revisions” and G. Călinescu’s “creative literary history.” On Negoïtescu’s traces, yet falling short of his speculative and expressive talents, have stepped many Romanian literary historians such as Eugen Negrici, Cornel Ungureanu, Dan C. Mihăilescu, Ion Simuț, Alex Ștefănescu, Mircea Anghelescu or Mihai Zamfir. All of them seemed

eager to publish, after the fall of communism, the historiographical syntheses that would finally provide the ignorant public with a trustworthy history of the Romanian literary tradition. Beyond individual particularities, we could notice that, when they are not overtly canonical like Nicolae Manolescu's and Alex Ștefănescu's, all these "alternatives" try to make a statement by picking up difficult "situations," when it is impossible for interpreters to distinguish between aesthetic and contextual elements, when the critics' dearest distinction between form and content proves itself non-operational.

Paradoxically, I. Negoïtescu and his delayed history have been hit from all directions. On the one hand, the defenders of contextual determinations found that their fellow critic had approached individual talent and literary productions as merely stylistic samples. On the other, the defenders of "aesthetic autonomy" found that their fellow critic had subordinated aesthetic achievements to moral or political factors. As it has already been proven, Negoïtescu himself vacillated between the two camps engaged in this combat.⁴² While he went on producing an aestheticized criticism (availing of *suggestion*, metaphor, and musicality), his *écriture* became a reference for ethical and political engagement. It is not by chance that Negoïtescu's history enhances those profiles of writers that, like the historian himself, assumed the ethos of writing both as existential engagement and as responsibility for the world they lived in. Authentic values (literary values as well) can only assert themselves, Negoïtescu suggests, within an open society that guarantees individual freedom. Thus, lacking the conditions of true creativity, totalitarian regimes cannot produce authentic literary values.

The absence of biographical elements and social-cultural considerations from Negoïtescu's history must not surprise the reader. He understands literary pieces as sublimated Life. Accordingly, it is the literary work that provides justification for an author's biography and not the other way round. Biographies and portraits can be deduced from the great pile of works brought to the fore as illustration. As the limits between the critic's commentary and the illustrative quotations are programmatically erased, the history leaves the general impression of fading faces clustered around dominant personalities. Literary communities and their manner of styling common experiences play an important role in Negoïtescu's historical scenario: the '48 generation, the Junimea literary society, the modernist writers of Macedoski's *Literatorul*, the literary critics from E. Lovinescu's *Sburătorul*, the new interwar Criterion generation, educated in the spirit of existentialist philosophy and of national mysticism.

Even if this history has a fragmentary and disrupted aspect—fragmentation must be understood as an effect of the critic's rationalist and liberal viewpoint—I. Negoïtescu does not dismiss completely the problematic issues of "identity" and "specificity." However, by moving the emphasis from "the national specificity" to the liquid transitions from one (literary) community to another and from one literary "period" to another,⁴³ the historian exposes the misfortunes of the concept of identity and its essential "fallenness."⁴⁴ A metamorphic approach to the literary continuum, and a stress on what has been shared by literary groups throughout the history of Romanian literature represent a solution to de-territorialize the concept of identity and to heal a supposedly "fallen" and obsolete genre.

Discussing the concept of "local/autochthonous creativity," the historian tends to value a more radical political engagement such as the one manifested, as an extension of

existentialism and spiritualism, among the representatives of the generation steered by the philosopher Nae Ionescu (1890–1940). As it happens, Mircea Eliade (1907–1986), Emil Cioran (1911–1995) and Eugen Ionescu (1909–1994)—all of them, former members of the so-called Criterion generation—have become worldwide celebrities, thus the happy and few Romanians who have received a star on the walk of fame. If we take into consideration the fact that, beside Nae Ionescu, an important role was also played by first-hand intellectuals such as Nichifor Crainic (1889–1972), Vasile Pârvan (1882–1927) or Mircea Vulcănescu (1904–1952), one cannot but conclude that the literary historian has noticed the line of radical nationalism and its re-confirmations, every time a new literary generation emerged. Negoïtescu’s interest in a fluid approach to identity makes him see the distinct profiles of entire groups and communities rather than individual portraits. Beyond specific modalities, styles and manners, an axis of “national thinking” binds together the passionate figures of Nicolae Bălcescu, Ion Heliade Rădulescu, B. P. Hasdeu, Mihai Eminescu, Nicolae Iorga, and those of the radical right-hand doctrinarians from the interwar period. Obviously, the soft and suggestive critic is strongly attracted to engaged and fiery tempers, to people who generate fanatical belief and utopian thinking, to people that, in a broader picture, may stand for a higher energy.

Written in exile, far away from communist Romania, *The History* authored by I. Negoïtescu assumes, as an indelible stylistic mark, the subjective judgment of our modern literature. The critic’s punctual interpretations (on authors and works) have been dismissed by his fellows as deforming, extravagant and, perhaps, childish. Produced by an *enfant terrible*, Negoïtescu’s *History* should be read neither as an edifying synthesis nor as a moral and political will. On the contrary, it should be re-habilitated as an attempt at instilling new life into a fallen critical genre through a strategy based on pathos, on the enhancement of emotions that are communally shared, which actually implies deforming or disfiguring past literary identities and reforming them into new paradigms. The best thing to do with this history is to declaim it aloud, as a classical poem, as a hymn to Life and to Life’s creative potentialities. Looking at things from this angle, “history” really becomes “a piece of contemporary literature,” because it conciliates the multiple lives and the effects of (past) identities in the intensity and *poiesis* of self-writing. Indeed, the auto-biographical imprint is subtly suggested by Negoïtescu’s tearing fascination with both the demons of concrete realities and the original purity of the spirit that reveals itself, without constraints, in every piece of creation. Re-read sine ira et studio, this history seems to keep about a certain freshness, an everlasting childish spirit that derives from its genuine pathetic disposition.

5. Following G. Călinescu: Mihai Zamfir and his “Brief,” “Alternative,” and “Panoramic” History

THE RECENT synthesis authored by Mihai Zamfir seems to be inspired, if we pay attention to the title, by a history of Romanian literature that has circulated mostly in Western Europe, Basil Munteanu's *Panorama de la littérature roumaine contemporaine*.⁴⁵ The book was translated and considered by the Romanian academia only in 1996.⁴⁶ Basil Munteanu (1897–1972) taught comparative literature at the University of Bucharest and, after his escape from communist Romania, was a researcher at the French CNRS. Beyond the shared features of the two histories—both of them are didactic, both of them rely on abstracted versions of literary works and biographies, both of them contain figures that actually stand for genres—the Romanian exile paid greater attention to the cultural and ideological contextualization. Moreover, he emphasized the importance of “national identity” after the constitution of Greater Romania, in 1918. This explains why Munteanu insisted on Dimitrie Gusti's sociological and ethnographic research—mapping the particularities of all regions inhabited by Romanians, which in fact sprang from a “nationalist” enthusiasm. The attempts of Constantin Rădulescu-Motru (1868–1957), Nichifor Crainic and Mihai Ralea (1896–1964) at promoting a doctrine of “constructive nationalism” were appreciated in the same manner. Modernist and avant-garde movements did not receive high scores. In compensation, the comparatist praised the works of writers inspired by autochthonous tradition such as Lucian Blaga (1895–1961), Octavian Goga (1881–1938), and other figures gathered around *Gândirea* (Thought) journal. Writing his history for a foreign audience, Basil Munteanu tried to focus only on those products that could have had a price on the export market, thus he bet on what he understood as “authenticity” in both life and work.

Mihai Zamfir parts with his model exactly on these “nationalist” points.⁴⁷ Because he publishes his synthesis after a period of aggressive doctrine feeding, of propaganda nationalism, he aims, more than anything else, at developing the aesthetic literacy of the post-communist public. This is why the critic denies—maybe in too radical a manner—the existence of “a national specificity.” Let us remark that this is the first time when Călinescu's theory is so strongly and so subversively challenged. Since neither Lovinescu nor his followers would dare to contest the reality of “national identity,” Romanian literature has kept on being perceived and interpreted as “one living being.” Lovinescu considered that (literary) creativity and thus originality are actually limited by “race boundaries,” that is, by national traits. Applying this logic, Jewish writers and the cosmopolitan avant-garde could not attain real aesthetic performances due to their racial “otherness.” While for Lovinescu the Romanian people manifests itself as “a race in the process of crystallization,”⁴⁸ thus as “a race” apt to assimilate the foreign influences in a creative way, for Basil Munteanu “the Romanian people” is already an undeniable reality, “an original [racial] synthesis”⁴⁹ whose identity cannot be doubted anymore.

An intellectual with manifest liberal views, Mihai Zamfir does not consider that originality springs from identity, be it *generational/group/communitarian identity*, as in

Negoïțescu's case, or *national identity*, as in Călinescu's. On the contrary, the old concept of "identity" is seen as a constrictive factor, as a limitation for the creative self. Creation is "a mysterious process" hence—Zamfir claims—it cannot be explained scientifically. Consequently, the "specificity" of a literary tradition (not only of Romanian literature) represents the sum of styles expressed in that specific tradition. Transcending its linguistic condition, "style" coagulates *the writer's (possible) worlds, his/her (religious) beliefs, his/her social vision, his/her biographical accidents, the psychology of his/her personality*⁵⁰ and has a mysterious essence.

Briefly said, Mihai Zamfir resolves the difficult equation of "the national specificity" that travels through our entire tradition and molded our methodological assumptions, by widening the conception of literary style to "a stylistic of existence."⁵¹ His historiographic endeavor turns into a "literary history of writers"⁵² that correlates stylistic insights, psychological and moral portraits, and contextual elements (history, society, and culture). Here we are, back to Călinescu's own solution for saving the decayed genre of literary history! Undeniably, the aim of Zamfir's "brief history" also proves to be the portrait. All chapters are snapshots of figures moved and made expressive, thus visible, by (strong) emotions. Enough proof would be, we think, the brief and poignant characterizations from the panorama's headlines. They are meant to catch these profiles' equation, to deliver it in a memorable and touching formula: Tudor Arghezi (1880–1967) is "the poet apostate and redeemed,"⁵³ Alexandru A. Philippide (1900–1979) is "the aristocrat forever sad,"⁵⁴ and so forth.

Like Călinescu's and Negoïțescu's, this synthesis can be read as an oblique diary, which affirms the co-presence of historian and characters in the same space. A promoter of our literature's fundamental Europeanness, Mihai Zamfir refashions the discourse on prominent personalities by turning with gusto to the times before communism and by keeping post-communism at arm's length. The author has not formed his critical style, like many others of his peers have done, by writing literary reviews on a weekly basis. So, the literary production under communism is dismissed as, bluntly put, disreputable, while the current post-communist literature can't be grasped because it has not shown distinct profiles, but only some trends. Plunging into past ages, drawing from deep the absent things and beings seems to be an excellent means to train one's critical imaginativeness. As the literary historian confessed, making these faces emerge from nowhere has always procured him "a sort of happy dizziness."⁵⁵

Mihai Zamfir stresses the subjective character of his history, which, like Negoïțescu's, is the fruit of personal options and conjectures. No specified method seems to direct the historian's endeavor, yet the interrogation of establishment keeps an overt methodological aim. Apparently, a hedonist reader's position suits better than a hardcore theorist's the initiative to save what is left from the monumental edifice erected by Călinescu. Canonical judgments, like those provided by Nicolae Manolescu's recent history,⁵⁶ do not save the prestige but give the final push to the history of literature as a genre. Zamfir warns his readers that the compiled chapters represent only "fictions" in a virtual "romance" of our literary evolution.⁵⁷ "The alternative" mentioned in the title heralds the need to push back the ideological functionalization of this genre and to focus on the petty things and on the faces that are menaced with complete disappearance. Zamfir's option

for a composition in bits and pieces, for portrait and anecdote rather than for systematic theory also reflects his decided refusal to accept a Marxist-inflexed, ideological structuration of history.

6. Conclusions

ENDORSING A concept of “subjectivity” that does not belong with idealism but with nominalism, we considered that a literary historian’s style (*l’écriture*), his/her manner of conveying referential reality or simply “his/her literary aspirations” have overt methodological aims. Since some of our most creative literary historians seem to share, on this point, the same interrogation—what are the means to rescue a genre (the history of literature) from its own paradoxes and final doom?—this change of approach has enabled us to understand how the process of fictionalisation can turn the history of literature into a “contemporary” issue. Experimenting on the forms—forms of hiding, showing, and assuming first-person discourse, forms of mingling the critical commentary with the otherness of illustrative quotations, forms of re-phrasing the argument of bibliographic authority, the three literary historians arrive at “a theory in the flesh of practice,” that aims at drawing from readers a more sensuous and bodily-engaging reaction. Paraphrasing Mallarmé, we can simply say that *tout, dans l’histoire littéraire, existe pour aboutir à un portrait*.

The desire to produce a greater “effect of real” through pieces of *memorabilia* (anecdotes and portraits) on what writers look like, on how writers are born and give birth, eat, live, love, possess things or die might be the symptomatology of young critical cultures such as ours. Far from spoiling the salience of the critical perspective, “the anecdotal theory,” “the creative history” or “le texte-recherche” (the text-research) aim at *re-humanizing* the theorist’s viewpoint. Even more precisely, the histories of (minor) literatures do not seem to have a genuine justification unless they become part of a broader, humanist pledge that is ready to interpret gestures and lives of individual figures as instantiations of a higher creative force traveling throughout the entire history of mankind.

We consider that these critics’ intuitive insight on the forms-of-life, on the way they are brought to the fore, and on their pathetic *Ur-grund* represents a premise for restarting the discussion on what could mean devoting oneself to an obsolete genre such as the history of a national literature. In a global environment that levels what is commonly shared and that suspects of exhibitionism any claim about individual or local differences, *cui prodest* writing or debating on the histories of national literatures, be they English, French, Spanish, Portuguese (whatever “English,” “French,” “Spanish” or “Portuguese” might stand for), German, Hungarian, Bulgarian, Serbian, Latvian, Russian, Norwegian, Danish... or even Romanian?

Due to a harsh no-exit and no-entry politics during communism, Romanian literary studies suffered from a sort of theoretical setback. Paradoxically, the limitation of transfers to and from synchronous foreign theory has acted on the history of Romanian literature in a creative manner, by preserving the remnants of 19th-century approaches, chiefly the appetite for anecdotes and portraits as well as their functionalizing as “sim-

ple forms” that engrain heightened gestures or ready-made, stylized movements.⁵⁸ Elaborated as a series of “effigies” or “engrams,” whose greatest and most paradoxical quality is to escape historical anchoring, these histories stand on a sensationalist plot structure. Read according to Călinescu’s prescription, as a “romance,” the history of literature shows its true colors. It is always a theory in the flesh of practice that speculates the reader’s sensations more than the reader’s theoretical insights.



Notes

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Abstract

Theory in the Flesh of Practice: Anecdote and Portraits in the Histories of Romanian Literature

Departing from Hayden White’s well-known assumptions on metahistory, we hypothesize that the anecdote—as microstructure, stock content, and as *memorabilia*—has played a fundamental role in the making of the Romanian literary histories. Certainly, one must look beyond the ideological and theoretical claims these histories bring in. Applying our analysis to the monumental history G. Călinescu delivered in 1941 and extending it to the following histories of the Romanian literature (I. Negoïtescu’s and Mihai Zamfir’s), we shed light on the residual elements, which, although ignored by the academic readership, play a dramatic role in the way these histories have been read, interpreted, and eventually recycled afterwards. The main idea of our essay is that, more than on positive science, this historiographic tradition is counting on a type of “anecdotal theory” that enables abstractions to become figures, that is, to become dense focal points for the readers’ attention and senses. Consequently, we would like to point at the fact that looking at the “petty things” (anecdotes on birth, death, love, sense of possession, manners of eating and living, etc.) scattered through the histories of Romanian literature written after 1940 does not necessarily obliterate their theoretical insights. On the contrary, this new focus can bring into the open the areas of real density, where the distinction form vs. content becomes useless and the true art of the literary historian resides in framing the moments—as portraits and as anecdotes—when the limitless potentialities of Life emerge as actual expressions.

Keywords

Romanian literary history, anecdote, portraits, G. Călinescu, I. Negoïtescu, Mihai Zamfir