



THE ROMANIAN MODERN NOVEL: A CHANGE OF DIRECTION

Iulia Maria GIUREA

UNIVERSITATEA DIN BUCUREȘTI, Romania

Abstract: THE FOLLOWING PAPER INTENDS TO ANALYZE THE MAIN CHANGES THAT LED TO THE BIRTH OF THE ROMANIAN NOVEL AS IT IS KNOWN TODAY. E. LOVINESCU WAS ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT FIGURES THAT SHAPED THE LITERARY ARENA IN THE INTER-WAR PERIOD, THE TIME WHEN THE ROMANIAN NOVEL TOOK A DIFFERENT DIRECTION. PROMOTER AND SUPPORTER OF SYNCHRONISM, LOVINESCU GAVE THIS PERIOD ITS FUNDAMENTAL AESTHETIC DIRECTION. IN ORDER TO REFLECT THE SPIRIT OF THE TIME, A CHANGE OF PERSPECTIVE WAS REQUIRED. THIS CHANGE INVOLVED NOT ONLY THE SHIFT BETWEEN RURAL AND URBAN, BUT ALSO A CERTAIN COMPLEXITY WHICH DERIVED FROM THE INVESTIGATION OF A MORE EVOLVED PSYCHOLOGY. THE NEW TYPE OF NOVEL, BRINGS WITH IT A NEW TYPE OF HERO, A MAN WHO LIVES IN THE BIG CITY, WHO LIVES A LIFE FULL OF MULTIPLE DEMANDS, WHOSE STRUGGLE IS NO LONGER A SOCIAL ONE, BUT AN INNER ONE AS HE IS FACING HIS OWN BEING.

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**Contact details
of the
author(s):** Email: giurea.iuliamaria@gmail.com

In 1868, the year when the article *În contra direcției de astăzi în cultura română* was published, Titu Maiorescu concluded: „The only real class in our country is the Romanian peasant and pain is his reality, under which he sighs at the delusions of the upper classes. Out of his daily sweat are taken the material means for the support of the fictitious edifice, which we call Romanian culture [...] and we do not produce, out of gratitude at least, a single work that lifts his heart and makes him forget, for a moment, about his everyday misery” (Maiorescu, 1978, pp. 128-129). Almost half a century later, in a completely different social, historical and cultural layout, after a war whose marks were undeniable, E. Lovinescu in *Istoria civilizației române moderne* reveals a completely different direction in which society in general and literature in particular was about to start: „the light does not come from the villages” (Lovinescu, 1972, p.412).



In 1868, Titu Maiorescu drew attention to some aspects that, according to the critic, led the Romanian culture of that time on an inappropriate path. It was considered inappropriate in the sense that the continuous import of forms from abroad did not concur with the cultural (and social) reality of the native material. Thus, the dominant tendency to imitate foreign models - whether manifested in literature, science, art or even in politics and civil liberties - which characterized Romanian society in the latter part of the nineteenth century, was deeply criticized by the leader of the most important cultural group of the time, *Junimea*. However, it is important to emphasize the fact that, beyond the obvious differences between the borrowed forms and the local material, beyond the absence of a solid foundation that might have worked as a basis for imported constructions, Maiorescu criticized the motives of those who made this phenomenon possible: „Regarding this orientation of the Romanian public, we cannot believe that an intelligent evaluation of the western culture was, in fact, what really lured them to it. The sole cause of this attraction could only be the vanity of Trajan's descendants, the vanity of showing foreign people, at all costs, that we are equal to them in what regards their level of civilization” (Maiorescu, 1978, p.126).

From this perspective, the end did not justify the means because in Maiorescu's view, imitation did not come from a genuine desire for harmonious development by reference to higher civilizations. Instead, it was the unflattering longing of the upper class to step on a higher cultural stage without suffering the labor of creating an authentic background according to the position they were searching. This line of thought highlights the conclusion drawn by the critic: the only authentic element of a civilization which finds itself still at the dawn of its cultural development can only be found in the village, among those who endure, sigh and toil. It seemed that, on their shoulders a new social class was beginning to emerge: a completely different class, whose offsprings were studying in the West and were bringing home the illusion of a successful imitation of fundamentally different societies.

In the literary field things were not completely different. The masterpieces of universal literature had long seen the light of day. The Romanian literary arena, however, was in a continuous process of making and transforming itself. The gap between Romanian and universal literature was undeniable and this fact was obvious especially when it came to prose. Only in 1863, Nicolae Filimon published the novel *Ciocoi vechi și noi* „whose appearance is didactically formalized in the birth certificate of the species” (Protopopescu, 1978, p.31). Thus, it can be said that only after the middle of the 19th century, the novel was established in our country as an independent species. Al. Protopopescu considered that "if we are to look at its becoming, we must accept a succession of «genesis» in the evolution of the Romanian novel, because *Istoria ieroglifică* written by Dimitrie Cantemir (followed by a real literary vacuum, until Ion Budai-Deleanu's *Tiganiada*) and *Tainele inimiei*, the eternal fragment of Kogălniceanu, and Eminescu's *Geniu pustiu*, represent attempts of «failed genesis»" (Protopopescu, 1978, p.32). In the view of the same critic, in 1920, when the novel signed by Liviu Rebreanu, *Ion*, was published, one can identify the true moment of the Romanian novel's birth. More than five decades elapsed between the moment when Titu Maiorescu regarded the village as the only authentic element Romanian culture had, criticizing the unjustified import of forms and the date of birth of the Romanian novel, a novel that, accidentally or not, brought to light the turmoil of the Romanian peasant.

If in Maiorescu's time the imitation acquired, under the given conditions, negative connotations, later, after the First World War, the optics changed. The idea that animated this period characterized by paradigm shifts was closely related to Lovinescu, the founder of *Sburătorul*, who advocated the need to align Romanian literature with Western artistic models or, in other words, to connect „Romanian literature with the «spirit of the century»” (Crohmălniceanu, 1972, p.25). This outlines the idea of synchronism, which means „the tendency to standardize all life forms of modern societies in solidarity with each other” (Lovinescu, 1972, p.395). This tendency was built upon



imitation as a law of the evolution of civilization: „at the basis of the mechanism of the contemporaneity of our material and moral life is the unique factor of imitation, in which some sociologists like Tarde have seen the forming method of each and every society [...] The existence of imitation involves the existence of the object to be imitated” (Lovinescu, 1972, p.404). The question of imitation and its implications are approached again, of course, from a completely different perspective than the one used decades before by Maiorescu. As it comes out from *În contra direcției...*, imitation is nothing more than the desire of young people „bordered by a fatal shallowness, with their minds and hearts set on fire too lightly” (Maiorescu, 1978, p.125), young people who, enchanted by the sparkle of foreign societies, overlook, says Maiorescu, „deeper historical foundations that must have produced those forms” (Maiorescu, 1978, p.125). Romanian cultural society of the time, a society in formation, lacked those foundations completely. In the eyes of the critic, it seemed that the sin of shallowness could have been, to some extent, forgiven; but that of vanity, could not be overlooked: the vanity of considering oneself equal to those imitated.

Half a century later, however, the notion takes on another dimension. Imitation is no longer spoken of in a pejorative sense, but it is seen as a mechanism that „starts only from top to bottom, that is from superior to inferior” (Lovinescu, 1972, p.409). In *Istoria civilizației române moderne*, E. Lovinescu brings into discussion two essential elements of imitation seen as a mechanism: transplantation and processing - processing seen as successive adaptations to the local spirit. In this way, imitation becomes the working principle of Lovinescu's synchronism that underlies the development and transformation of Romanian literature. The critic argues that regardless of the field in which the process of imitation takes place, imitators benefit from the results of the work of others without restoring in any way the evolutionary phases of the borrowed form: „the same thing happens when spreading ideas or artistic forms: we do not remake the thinking of ancient thinkers, just as we do not imitate ancient epics” (Lovinescu, 1972, p.419). In Lovinescu's opinion, Romanian literature made no exception to this rule of burning the stages in the process of transformation because „it did not remake the phases of the development of universal literature, but developed itself, in a revolutionary manner, based on synchronism; without having a classicism, we had a romanticism, as this European movement coincided with the very moment of our formation” (Lovinescu, 1972, p.419). Thus, a feeling of inferiority sets in motion „a fierce desire for sudden uniformity and gain of lost time” (Lovinescu, 1972, p.422).

Lovinescu talks about a certain angle of refraction that is formed when an idea passes from one ethnic environment to another. Our cult literature - the critic claimed - „is the result of foreign ideological refraction through the ethnic individuality of the Romanian people” (Lovinescu, 1981, p.138). So what was that ethnic individuality that the critic referred to? There is a discussion of a stratification of the Romanian society of the time: the base consists of „a numerous, inert, passive, traditional, nationality-preserving peasantry” (Lovinescu, 1972, p.415), while the upper classes „once noble, urban today, intelligent, receptive, through which all the elements of universal civilization are introduced” (Lovinescu, 1972, p.415) were seen as the main factor of progress.

Therefore, the emphasis on literature is different: the literature related to the oppressed, the submissive, the peasantry in general, finds itself, this time, outside the aesthetic norms, representing rather „an ethical desideratum”(Crohmălniceanu, 1972, p.33). The urban environment, the large urban agglomerations populated by individuals with ever-changing souls and intellectual structures, is now in the forefront. Swinging between the two fundamentally different classes: the ignorant peasantry that „kept on carrying the traditional coat and hat, the locks of the Dacians from Trajan's Column and continued to eat its millennial polenta” (Lovinescu, 1972, p.414) and the upper class, without any solid ethnic bases that fed its artistic appetite with forms borrowed from other literatures, the conditions in which Romanian literature developed were not exactly favorable ones. In this context, the group



founded by Lovinescu played the main role in charting a new path as „it carried out a salutary action, standing out against the ethnic imprisonments, which persisted in making our literature rural and folkloric, in narrowing its concerns and in using the rural dimension under the pretext of preserving its autonomous character” (Crohmălniceanu, 1972, p.31). In this light, the thin blanket of the nobility, now urbanized, subject to a series of changes caused by foreign influences that made their mark on both the way of speaking and the way of „thinking, as well as on the way of dressing, eating, spending time” (Lovinescu, 1972, p.414) becomes the main factor of change. In the literary field, prose is the one that shows obvious signs of change and evolution, this being due, as Lovinescu explained, to its objective character and to the fact that it was subject to more stable rules.

Taking into account all these aspects, the opinion of the critic Ov. S. Crohmălniceanu, according to which „the appearance of the modern novel is indeed linked to the development of the bourgeois world, to the complexity of the social relations it brings with it and to the process of asserting human individuality within them” (Crohmălniceanu, 1972, p.188) can be considered fully justified. Moreover, in 1911, in the article entitled *Criza actuală a literaturii noastre*, Lovinescu wrote: “We cannot, however, live -literarily- always in the world of the outlaws, of that of horse thieves, in which the romanticism of the literature called *sămănătoristă*¹ takes place; we can't always listen to the stories of old Gheorghe, who puffs from the pipe in the low light of dusk, straightens his voice to start an old story, lengthening it and never finishing it [...] A literature at the height of our cultural moment must reflect other heartbeats and other higher thoughts and other intellectual and sentimental speculations” (Lovinescu, 1981, pp.198-199). Thus, the transition from unsophisticated literature to one that reflects the intimate games of the human personality „will define, in 1928, the concept of evolution from rural to urban, by redirecting the attention from «the outpourings of physical life» to the «pale forehead»” (Protopopescu, 1978, p.45). In other words, Lovinescu himself emphasizes this idea, arguing that „urbanism, however, imposes a new world, with new problems, of a more complex psychology and, as paradoxical as it may seem, one can say that it brings with it a type of psychology possible only to certain forms of civilization” (Protopopescu, 1978, p.167).

Following the spirit of these ideas, Lovinescu lays the foundations of a system within which the modern Romanian novel, as it is known today, will be born. If the first direction of its evolution is from rural to urban, the second one, with an overwhelming importance for the system, is the one from lyricism to epic literature, moving from subject to object. But what is to be understood by lyricism and epic literature in Lovinescu's sense? For the critic, lyricism means an exacerbated subjectivity, an „epidemic subjectivity of the writer who tends to invade and falsify the object of representation” (Protopopescu, 1972, p.45). Subjectivity thus becomes harmful for writing. On the other hand, being objective means nothing else but „the operation of analyzing the subjectivity of the soul” which consists, in fact, in a descent into the psychological depths of the subject.

In other words, it can be said that *Sburatorul* and, hence, Lovinescu are responsible „to a significant extent, for the dissipation of the passéist, rustic and idyllic atmosphere of our pre-war prose and the flourishing of the Romanian urban novel after the war” (Crohmălniceanu, 1972, p.44).

Camil Petrescu's views, an imported figure of the group founded by Lovinescu and also of the Romanian literary arena in general, do not make a discordant note regarding the directions proposed by the critic. In 1927 in an article published in *Viața literară*, Camil Petrescu displayed relatively similar beliefs: „with heroes who eat five olives for three weeks, who smoke a cigarette for two years, with a tavern in the small mountain town and the three-story household of the teacher in Moldova, it is not possible to make novel or even literature. Literature is linked, of course, to problems of

¹ *Sămănătorul* was a literary and political magazine which is remembered as a tribune for early 20th century traditionalism, me-romanticism and ethnic nationalism.



conscience. Therefore one must have as environment a society in which the problems of conscience are possible" (Camil Petrescu, 1972, p.44). The society in which literature in general, and prose in particular, could flourish was, in the vision of the two, an urban one, both of them considering that „the modern novel develops in the sense of investigating a more complicated, more evolved psychology [...] specific in particular to the man who lives in big city centers and leads a differentiated existence, full of multiple demands" (Crohmălniceanu, 1972, p.43). From this perspective, one must understand Lovinescu's words according to which modern civilizations are exclusively urban: the light no longer comes from the villages.

One of the most famous authors from Sburătorul, indisputably under the influence of Lovinescu's theories regarding the need to synchronize Romanian literature with the European one, Camil Petrescu militates for a new type of literature that validates the changes that had taken place in science, psychology and philosophy. In his opinion, epic literature up to Proust no longer corresponded to the structure of modern culture, becoming anachronistic. A change of perspective was therefore required, so the novel was called to reflect the spirit of the time. The preoccupation for psychology, for interiority, for the *self* and for probing the depths of the human soul, became superior aspects of the novel. Their superiority came from reaching a complexity that had been lacking until then. The new type of novel, called either *Ionic novel* (Manolescu), *experimental novel* (Ghe. Glodeanu) or *reflexive novel* (Radu G. Țeposu), brings with it a new type of hero, „a conscience, a problematic individual who does not try to dominate the world by action, but by the force of the spirit" (Glodeanu, 2007, p.24). His struggle is no longer social, he is facing his own being.

The literary critic Mihai Zamfir claims that "the map of our literature from the first half of the twentieth century appeared, however, drawn by a firm hand, with a clarity and an accuracy untouched until then" (Zamfir, 2017, p.363). This hand that traces the course of Romanian literature belongs to E. Lovinescu, "Maiorescu of the next century" as the same critic calls him in his work, *Scurtă istorie: panorama alternativă a literaturii române*. Promoter and supporter of the synchronism as "the need to synchronize the national works with European ones and not only to mimic them" (Piru, 1981, p.321) Lovinescu gives this period its fundamental aesthetic direction.



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