
IOANA POSTELNICU: THE COORDINATES OF A LITERARY DEBUT

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Abstract: *The article examines Ioana Postelnicu’s literary debut and subsequent consecration within the Sburătorul literary circle, focusing centrally on her relationship with E. Lovinescu. Drawing on the writer’s memoiristic texts and the critic’s notes, the study traces the formative moment of their encounter and its role in shaping the author’s literary destiny. Particular attention is given to Lovinescu’s practice of assigning pseudonyms, interpreted as a mechanism of integration but also of symbolic control over the identities of debuting writers. The case of Eugenia Banu—who became Ioana Postelnicu after several onomastic reconfigurations—is discussed from the perspective of the woman writer’s condition and the ambivalence of Lovinescu’s discourse on women’s literature..*

Keywords: *literary pseudonym; women’s literature; Ioana Postelnicu; E. Lovinescu; Sburătorul; interwar literature)*

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The name of Ioana Postelnicu today enjoys relatively limited resonance on a broader scale. The writer belongs to the younger generation that made its literary debut during the final phase of the Sburătorul literary circle, in 1939, only four years before the death of E. Lovinescu.

Regarding her debut, Elena Zaharia-Filipaș notes: “Ioana Postelnicu burst impetuously into the literary circle, confident in her literary vocation, although she declared herself shy and wept at the first words of praise” (Zaharia-Filipaș, 2004, p. 19). Moreover, the first meeting between Eugenia Banu—the real name of Ioana Postelnicu—and the great critic was the consequence of a momentary impulse, one that concealed the lifelong aspirations of a woman who, until then, had not found the courage to follow her path. Retracing the thread of memory, the writer would repeatedly relive, whenever the occasion arose, the emotions of that first encounter, which completely changed her life, as well as the manner in which she decided to contact Lovinescu. In the pages of her memoiristic work *Seva din adâncuri*, she records this moment with the meticulous attention to detail that characterizes her prose:

“I opened the large, sheet-sized pages of the newspaper *Dimineața*. On the second page, at its center, there was a photograph: a man with broad cheeks, his head covered with white hair, neatly trimmed, with gentle eyes. A headline in large letters read: *Thirty Years of Literary Criticism*. The page was filled with texts signed



by 'Sburătorul' writers. They recounted how they had come to the critic's house, how they had been received by him, how much they owed to the *Sburătorul* literary circle. I read and could not get enough. Mrs. Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu was writing, as were Ticu Arhip, Felix Aderca, and others, and I began to understand that it would not be difficult for me to reach that place as well... that literary circle I had heard about, which I regarded as a Parnassus accessible only to the chosen few. And yet, gaining entry was not difficult. I would try it myself. 'Mother, I am going to telephone the critic,' I said excitedly, after telling her who Lovinescu was and even reading aloud some of what the writers had related. 'You are right to do so,' my mother encouraged me, knowing that for years I had been filling notebooks with everything that crossed my mind."

[...]

"I looked up Lovinescu's number in the telephone directory. So that he would not think I was just some young girl, so that he would know I was a lady, I spoke to him in the manner he himself later recorded in a feuilleton, published subsequently in a volume. I had the most awkward conversation imaginable. And, as I mentioned above, since I relive my recollections with the same intensity with which I lived the events themselves, at this very moment I blush at my self-importance, my ignorance, my social clumsiness, my complete lack of deference—stemming from an immense fear of what I was doing, from an overwhelming awareness of an act of formidable daring, entirely ignoring the conventions of politeness. It was not something frivolous, but an attitude meant to draw attention to the fact that I was not just anyone, but a person of honorable standing, from a social stratum of... the elite. Oh, how foolish, how inept." (Postelnicu, 1985, p. 207)

Thus, encouraged by her mother's urging and driven by the desire to breathe, herself, the air inhaled by the chosen few, Eugenia Pop—a name acquired after her marriage to Felix Pop—committed the boldest act of independence she could have imagined at the time, a foundational milestone on her literary path. On the other end of the line stood the unknown.

The awkward conversation and the encounter that led to this lady from an elite social stratum gaining entry into the world of Romanian interwar letters are also recorded by the great critic:

"'My sir,' a woman's voice scratched at my ear over the telephone, slightly hoarse, 'my sir, when and how might I see you with literature?'"

"My sir?"—that is, your sir—I do not have the honor of being one," I replied irritably, annoyed both by the unnatural expression and by the unexpected familiarity.

The voice on the telephone protested; she believed she had expressed herself appropriately.

"I would prefer that you kindly address me simply and without possessives, which our language does not employ. As for literature, I am at your disposal, as I am to anyone, in the afternoon.'" (Lovinescu, 1941, p. 316)

And indeed, the critic received her in his home—the "young lady, beautiful, with the slender line of a sapling-like body, with auburn hair" (Lovinescu, 1941, p. 318)—on a summer afternoon in 1937. In contrast to the impression the woman had made on him over the telephone, her literary attempts, her most hidden thoughts entrusted to the page—thoughts that no one had read or even guessed until then—led Lovinescu to conclude that he was in the presence of an authentic talent:

"My opinion is formed, and for the time being there is no need for you to continue. The novel itself does not interest me at the moment; perhaps it is not good, but that does not matter. What interests me is solely the certain fact that you are a writer who, if she has not yet written a good book, will write one. I have forgotten everything—the confused impressions from the telephone as well—and I find myself once again with that joy I have always felt at the moment of discovering a talent." (Lovinescu, 1941, p. 319)

In this way, E. Lovinescu granted her his endorsement, and Eugenia Pop—Popea, as she would be affectionately called—entered under his tutelage, receiving the long-desired invitation into the literary space governed by the critic. This very conversation—made famous through its recording



by both the critic and the writer—also occasioned the utterance of words that reflect the essence of Lovinescu's ideas regarding the condition of women writers. When the (still) unknown woman who had telephoned him firmly asserted that literature was, for her, an existential imperative, Lovinescu cast doubt on this claim by replying: "Literature is not, in general, a feminine vocation, but a masculine one" (Lovinescu, 1941, p. 317). The critic's response expresses, Elena Zaharia-Filipaș argues, "the attitude of the male spirit, fundamentally distrustful of women's creative vocation" (Zaharia-Filipaș, 2004, p. 5).

"No other woman writer from the Sburătorul circle did E. Lovinescu support as much as 'Popea,'" Bianca Burța-Cernat rightly observes (Burța-Cernat, 2011, p. 288). Indeed, the birth of Ioana Postelnicu, as she would become known to the broader public, is due to the great critic to an overwhelming extent. And over time, the writer would never fail to pay him tribute. Even in an interview granted on the occasion of her ninetieth birthday, nearly six decades after her debut, when invited to scrutinize the past through the lens of experiences accumulated over nine decades of life, Ioana Postelnicu considers her encounter with the critic E. Lovinescu to have been decisive:

"My encounter with Lovinescu... was decisive. Because of him, I entered another world. My life was a continuous obsession... I longed to write, to write... From the age of fourteen I wanted to become a writer, but I did not know how... Well, my meeting with Lovinescu was a miracle [...] To come to be so highly valued by him—I had not dared to imagine such a thing... In fact, he made my path for me. If I exist and am who I am, I owe it to Lovinescu." (Genaru, 2000)

Nor does the author miss the opportunity in *Seva din adâncuri* to portray Lovinescu in the role of a Pygmalion, with herself, in turn, assuming the role of Galatea:

"My entire life changed its course. It is divided in two: the life before him and the life after him [...] What I do know is that, in the final years of his life, Lovinescu experienced the joy of a new conquest in the most essential domain of his existence—that of literary creation. He took an interest in my development, guided me as a mentor through the splendid meanders of organized reading, into the mystery of the reception of symphonic music, into the art of detecting beauty in a poem. My mind was enriched; my sensibility refined. I was in the age when a woman blossoms. I too was blossoming, toward the critic's secret pride in observing that his esteem was bestowed upon a talent borne by a beautiful lady—something that flattered him. I showed him such admiration." (Postelnicu, 1985, p. 225)

As in the case of the mythological figure, Ioana Postelnicu is, without doubt, a creation of E. Lovinescu. And the myth, fused with reality, follows all its coordinates, for, according to anecdotes concerning the privileged relationships within the literary circle, the relationship between the two would not have been limited solely to a secret pride on the part of the creator and an immeasurable admiration on the part of the creature. Moreover, the critic's notes in *Agende*, the journal that had silenced the newly arrived writer, reveal that their relationship exceeded the boundaries of a strictly literary bond; yet Ioana Postelnicu would never acknowledge that there had been a relationship of another nature between them:

"Those years of his, until he left this world, I know were illuminated by my existence. I even believe that he was flattered when certain equivocal remarks reached his ears... And they did reach him. They reached me as well. I found them to be insults to the personality of the great critic. How could such suppositions be made about him... about me...? Before him, I was, or considered myself to be, an ant, of such negligible significance in comparison with him. It never crossed my mind that anything else could have been assumed." (Postelnicu, 1985, p. 229)

Although denied until the very end by Ioana Postelnicu, the relationship that developed between the two—and which was acknowledged by the critic in his own notes—has led to various interpretations of the woman’s destiny as a prose writer. Thus, the overt support that E. Lovinescu extended to the young lady with literary aspirations appears, Bianca Burța-Cernat argues, to stem rather from masculine pride or from so-called sentimental reasons, “in any case, not primarily from esteem for the author’s talent” (Burța-Cernat, 2011, p. 288). The fate of the debuting writer would be sketched in the smallest details by the firm hand that had, moreover, drawn the guiding lines of an entire literary landscape. It seems that Lovinescu wished “to bring forth from nothing a new, surprising woman prose writer,” for whom he conceived all the elements of her literary identity. The pseudonym was one of these.

The adoption of a pseudonym was not an unfamiliar practice in the world of Romanian writers of the period; however, what was distinctive at *Sburătorul* was the fact that authors were assigned their names of authorship, with E. Lovinescu assuming the role of baptizing his writers. In *Grup sburător. Trăitul și scrisul împreună în cenaclul lui E. Lovinescu*, Ligia Tudurachi identifies two dimensions of the now-famous Lovinescian ritual. On the one hand, she argues that the act of changing the identity of those who wrote was meant to respond to their need for individual reinvention. The debutant, feeling the need to integrate into the literary group, consented to the shedding of his or her civil name in an attempt to become an entirely different person. On the other hand, the act of naming another conferred upon the one who named an authority difficult to contest, thus laying the foundations for a relationship of dependence and even subordination. Described by Sașa Pană as a “spender of identity papers for poets” (Pană, 2012, p. 141), the critic “relieves writers of responsibility in the construction of the self. He decides in their stead, much as a parent does for a newborn child, incapable of choosing on its own” (Tudurachi, 2019, p. 267). Such de-responsibilization naturally occurs in the case of Eugenia Pop as well, who—displaying a docile attitude characteristic of ladies from the elite of the time—exchanges the tutelage of a domineering husband for that of the literary master.

In an interview granted in the spring of 1970 and reproduced in full in the volume *Biografii posibile*, edited by Ilena Corbea and Nicolae Florescu, the prose writer explains how Eugenia Banu—her original name—became Ioana Postelnicu:

“Here is what Lovinescu wrote to me on 4 August 1938, after I had left him the manuscript of my first novel: ‘From the manuscript of your novel, I have shaped a short story, *Ioana*, out of the fragment dealing with the school and the heroine Ioana’s attempted suicide (Ioana being the name I had given the heroine). I have changed nothing, realizing too late that you had no need of such intervention. I have merely removed certain passages in order to reduce the bulk of the manuscript. The signature is Bogdana Postelnicu, to whom I send my affectionate tributes on the occasion of her literary debut.’ Thus I learned that I had been given the pseudonym Bogdana Postelnicu. Later on, he himself exchanged names with the novel’s heroine, and I became Ioana Postelnicu, while the novel appeared under the title *Bogdana*.” (Corbea; Florescu, 1973, p. 178)

However, Bogdana Postelnicu is not the first pseudonym Lovinescu bestowed upon the young writer—for, just as he was accustomed to changing the identities of newcomers, he frequently resorted to a process of “de-naming,” whereby a newly acquired identity could be abruptly replaced or remain suspended for days, weeks, or even months. Lovinescu himself addresses the manner in which this practice of naming was devised in a text entitled *The Name*, published in 1937. Among other things, the critic points to two important aspects entailed by the act of naming, thereby justifying its implementation.

Lovinescu first raises the issue of minority representatives who frequented the literary circle. “The foremost duty of minorities toward the people in whose midst they live,” he writes, “is to



borrow the external appearance of presentation; it is the first, naturally, though not the last" (Tudurachi, 2019, p. 268). The critic then turns, on a secondary level, to the literary dimension of this practice:

"Even Romanians cannot present themselves to the public under the harmful form of unharmonious or banal syllables, which predispose the reader to hostility or lack of receptivity. It is therefore mandatory that they attend to their toilette, and once the principle has been adopted, that they do so with the utmost care: for if a name is a burden for which we are not responsible—a mere accident—then the pseudonym, as a voluntary and selective gesture, must stand as proof of good taste..." (Tudurachi, 2019, p. 269)

Viewed through the lens provided by these two clarifications, the change of Eugenia Banu's name may also be reconsidered. The interchange operated by the critic between the first name of the protagonist of the debut novel, Ioana, and the prose writer's own first name, Bogdana, is, of course, a matter of taste. Thus, the novel comes to be entitled *Bogdana* and is signed by Ioana Postelnicu.

What is particularly interesting, however, is another aspect. Bogdana Postelnicu was not, as one might assume, the critic's first option. In the interview cited above, the writer confesses that Lovinescu had initially considered it appropriate for her texts to bear a male signature, Sergiu Dușescu. The reasons why, in the midst of a period of female literary emancipation, the critic chose to conceal a woman writer behind a masculine identity are open to multiple interpretations. On the one hand, this gesture may have been motivated by the example of nineteenth-century women writers whose pens found freedom from social constraints only under the shelter of a masculine identity. Another perspective from which this issue may be approached is that of literary marginality or marginalization. The woman writer, in the phallogentric Romania of the nineteenth century, was the representative of a minority—a minority tolerated by the Author, whose dominance—within the citadel of letters, as everywhere else—was absolute. In this way, she was left with no alternative but to follow the great critic's guidance, fulfilling the foremost duty of a minority: assuming the appearance and likeness of the majority element. Thus, Eugenia Banu, fully subordinated to the founding authority of the Lovinescian spirit, signed her first texts published in *Adevărul literar* under the name Sergiu Dușescu.

Of course, it is indisputable that the 1930s represented, in Romania, the peak moment of women's literary production. Equally undeniable are the support and openness that Lovinescu extended to women writers. Returning, however, to the particular case of Ioana Postelnicu, in the oscillation between the two identities Lovinescu attempted to assign to Eugenia Banu—the masculine and the feminine—one may discern the critic's own vacillating approaches to the concept of women's literature. Ultimately, it is the feminine personality that emerges victorious.

For Ioana Postelnicu, the experience of literary baptism becomes, in Ligia Tudurachi's view, an "obsession" that the prose writer carries beyond the boundaries of fiction: "just as, through the complicated play of substitutions, the protagonist of *Bogdana* had 'transferred' the prose writer's name to herself, she comes, within the novel, to need a pseudonym in turn. She will consequently undergo a baptism. And she will be called 'Jeanne,' continuing her movement between the two Lovinescian choices" (Tudurachi, 2019, p. 285).



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