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From ideological literary criticism to the educational status of literature in the 1950s

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Abstract

Since it is an important element of the literary text's existence as aesthetic unit, the language of the literary work provides a significant number of arguments for establishing the latter's degree of artistry. Maiorescu's principle of placing aesthetics before ethics, which characterizes Romanian education before 1948, stops working after this date, when literature, both in terms of its creation and of its critical interpretation, is brought under political control and placed in the propagandistic service of the single party. Our paper aims to analyze this change in perspective and the contextual causes that generated it.

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Introduction

The attention paid, in the first communist decade, by the curricular documents and the school textbooks to the matters concerning the language of the literary work is of a varied degree of emphasis, its content changing quickly according to the political and ideological modifications occurring in the age.

The determinations acting on this important aspect of the artistic text come from areas seemingly distant from the field of literature's educational existence. However, we believe that, as surprising as it may sound today, identifying and relating them is absolutely necessary to the understanding of the phenomenon under discussion.

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Literary criticism

Firstly, it is rather evident, especially after 1948, that literature enters, for at least a decade, under political control, and the role reserved for it is almost exclusively that of propaganda instrument mainly directed at the “large masses of the population.” We believe that the alphabetization campaign, which is correct and beneficial at its core, is also motivated, from this perspective, by such a reason: to secure or to facilitate the wide access to texts that, especially under the more attractive and emotionally stirring form of literature, could transmit more efficiently the desired ideological message. Or, so that it could be received without difficulty, the language employed in those texts needed to be free of the great decoding challenges which are necessarily entailed by great artistry.

This explains, on the one hand, the promotion and elevation to the status of literary work of texts that are, often, on the minimum acceptable level to justify such a classification. Whether due to the absence of any shade of talent, or because they have it, but they censor their true artistic vocation so as to take advantage of the opportunities of the moment, most of the writers at the time go beyond themselves to satisfy these imperative, after all, demands, to create for the people, for their understanding, in the living and simple language of the popular masses.

On the other hand, even the involuntary slips into more “pretentious” or more specifically expressive areas of language constitute, in the view of the political power and of its cultural commissioners, serious departures from ideology, open to the most severe punitive measures.

The accusation of “cosmopolitanism” – paired by that of allegiance to the “decadent” theories on art, indebted to the bourgeois ideology of the West and springing from a hostile attitude towards the interests of the people – is promptly formulated any time the political leaders of culture notice such “unprincipled” and “antiparty” manifestations. There are numerous examples in the press of the day, since the latter was under strict and vigilant political control, of such punitive reactions, but some are particularly significant due to their impact and their discouraging effect. Among them, there is an article by Ovid S. Crohmălniceanu (1949), where the critic admonishes the lack of talent characterising some short-story writers whose work dealt, without exception, with aspects of the class struggle in Romanian villages and factories. In effect, the critic does nothing else than to point out the lack, sometimes blatant, of artistry characterizing these texts.

Read today, with no knowledge of the political context, the lines of this demonstration seem elementary statements, which would need no particular defence or careful theoretical argumentation.

Although he ably constructs his demonstration, placing it in the essential ideological frame of the moment, in the context of a police-type ideological vigilance, the gesture does not go unnoticed and the forces rapidly engaged in writing an indicting reply are impressive. The case is discussed in a meeting of the Central Committee of the Romanian Workers’ Party, where the “deviations” of Ovid S. Crohmălniceanu are severely criticized and are met with most disquieting warnings. On this note, the party’s newspaper, *Scânteia* (“Să luptăm”/“Let’s fight”, 1949), formulates, shortly after, a true indictment, playing the tune of indignation at the critic’s suggestion that only 5% of the young writers “should remain in the field of literature.”: “Oricât de revoltătoare s-ar părea această propunere plină de dispreț ciocoiesc pentru noile condeie care pătrund în literatura noastră, ea apare în adevărata ei lumină abia atunci când analizăm mai de aproape care sunt lucrările criticate și cine sunt cei pe care autorul îi socotește nedemni de a scrie. EXEMPLELE NEGATIVE DATE ÎN ARTICOL SUNT LUATE APROAPE EXCLUSIV DIN LUCRĂRILE CARE SE OCUPĂ DE LUPȚA CLASEI MUNCITOARE ȘI A ȚĂRĂNIMII MUNCITOARE pentru construirea socialismului. Articolul este scris cu un vădit accent de ironie, el fiind în întregime sa o persiflare a temei noi în literatura noastră. Și asta se cheamă după tov. O. Crohmălniceanu «luptă pentru calitate»! Ce altceva se ascunde sub această etichetă ipocrită decât un profund dispreț nu numai pentru literatura nouă, nu numai pentru tema nouă, dar pentru însăși viața și lupta poporului muncitor – pentru ceea ce frământă masele, pentru socialism, pentru fericirea patriei? Este lesne de recunoscut în această judecată buruiana otrăvită a cosmopolitismului, arma ideologiei imperialiste, vechea poziție de desconsiderare a maselor, de neîncredere în forța lor creatoare, săpată în conștiința intelectualilor noștri de burghezia trădătoare de patrie. Căci cosmopolitismul nu înseamnă numai citarea din scriitorii și criticii apusului decadent, COSMOPOLITISMUL SE MANIFESTĂ PRIN LIPSA DE DRAGOSTE PENTRU REALIZĂRILE PATRIEI, PENTRU SOCIALISM, PRIN DISPREȚ PENTRU CLASA MUNCITOARE. Iar argumentul «calității» este și a fost întotdeauna argumentul cosmopolitiților fără patrie, masca sub care acești «esteți» au încercat să lovească în ceea ce abia se naște, pentru a apăra ceea ce și-a trăit traiul și moare. [...] o astfel de critică este o formă de luptă dușmană împotriva noii literaturi, o formă de pătrundere a ideologiei dușmane care NU LOVEȘTE NUMAI ÎN OPERA LITERARĂ DAR TINDE SĂ MINEZE DRAGOSTEA FAȚĂ DE PATRIA

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