

Mihai Ralea and the “Ethics of Reading” Foreign Writers

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Abstract: *Romanian literature is based more on influence rather than on innovation. In such a context, the literary discourse is brokered by critics who dispose of authority and method, knowledge and information. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the monthly magazine *Viața Românească* and its editorial board offered to educate the masses by presenting the seminal works of the most important foreign classic and contemporary writers. This paper aims to explore the reading method used in “Note pe marginea cărților” [“Marginal Notes”] by Mihai Ralea (1896-1964), one of the most representative critics of the aforementioned ideological publication.*

Keywords: *interpretive patterns, Mihai Ralea, ideological criticism, J. Hillis Miller, ethics of reading, social sciences*

Résumé : *La littérature roumaine est basée plus sur l'influence que sur l'innovation. Dans un tel contexte, le discours littéraire est négocié par des critiques qui disposent de l'autorité et de la méthode, de la connaissance et de l'information. Au début du XX^e siècle, la revue mensuelle *Viața Românească* et son conseil d'administration proposaient d'éduquer les masses par la présentation des œuvres majeures des écrivains étrangers classiques et contemporains les plus importants. Cet article se propose d'explorer la méthode de lecture utilisée dans « Note pe marginea cărților » [« Des notes dans la marge des livres »] par Mihai Ralea (1896-1964), un des critiques littéraires les plus importants de la revue idéologique susmentionnée.*

Mots-clés : *modèles interprétatifs, Mihai Ralea, le criticisme idéologique, J. Hillis Miller, l'éthique de la lecture, les sciences sociales*

With the 6th issue of 1910, the table of contents of the Jassy monthly magazine *Viața Românească*—whose literary and scientific orientation had been set by its senior editors, Professor C. Stere and Dr. I. Cantacuzino, ever since its appearance, in March 1906—introduces a new column, titled “Note pe marginea cărților” [“Reading Notes”], where individuals—sometimes under the guise of pseudonyms—subscribe to the collective authorial title as “Contributors.”

The well-articulated and concise articles which inaugurated the column assessed personal readings according to three levels of analysis. The first is ideological, the second involves a comparison between Romanian literature and the European models of authority, and the third attempts to introduce and popularize prestigious or new foreign

writers. Each of these levels is linked to the influential interpretive theories of the time, all pointing to the magnetic keyword: *science*.

In such an ideal laboratory-like paradigm, reading “the soul” (of the peoples, of the authors, etc.) is put in the service of progressive programs, like the one adopted by *Viața Românească*, which advocated the formation and support of a specific national culture, valuable in itself and through its ability to assimilate the hallmarks of universal culture; the editors of the magazine also held the belief that this positioning could only be gained through an educational process based on in-depth observation of local socio-historical realities (“Cătră cetitorii” [“To the Readers”] 5).

We should note that, by introducing a much more flexible column for the circulation of ideas than the rigid forms already available, such as “Cronici” [“Panorama”] and “Recenzi” [“Book Reviews”], the periodical makes a shift towards modernization. What draws attention to the overall profile of the publication is how it deals with internal resources and external instruments, with the relationship between tradition and modernity, in its attempt to promote the development of culture. In scientific terms, *Viața Românească* manifested a preference for organic solutions to the adoption of foreign models.

Anyone who skims through the magazine’s issues is presented with the image of a magazine which manifestly preserved its ideology, and whose editors and contributors acted as a group, each according to his own skills and area of expertise. The main purpose was to redefine, at the beginning of the 20th century, some elements of background, however scarce they might be. In this sense, “Note pe marginea cărților,” fashioned after the model of plain “reading notes,” offers a modern interpretation of the old tradition of personal annotations, without restricting itself to works of literature. The texts included in this column pay as much attention as possible to objectivity, and they are not written in an impressionistic, whimsical, and egotistical key of simple pleasure. Instead, they are intended to prove useful to the readership, who thus receive a generous offer of knowledge, in a mix of Protestant ethics, capitalist pragmatism and an appreciation for the encyclopedic spirit of the Enlightenment.

In the early 1920s, when Mihai Ralea fully asserts himself among the magazine’s columnists, diligently contributing to both the literary and the scientific dimension of the publication profile, the editorial space ascribed to “Note pe marginea cărților” turns into a genuine writing laboratory, where theoretical papers are prepared for the future publishing in volumes, as a consequence of the imperative social need for valuable books.

The general designation as “Contributors” disappears as the authors begin to feel to a larger extent the weight of authorship. Among the authors of highly subjective interventions, we find Gala Galaction, who keeps a reading diary, where he comments on books from his own library. In the field of strict specialization, we find Ioan Botez, with articles on British literature—“Două comedii vechi engleze” [“Two Old English Comedies”]; “Shakespeare: Negustorul din Veneția” [“Shakespeare: *The Merchant of Venice*”]—, and Garabet Ibrăileanu, who tests the validity of his intuitions in fragments which appear impressionistic at first, but which are actually drafts for subsequent critical analyses. In fact, in his anthology of literary articles *Notes and Impressions* (1920), Ibrăileanu assigns the title “Marginal Notes” to the part where he was attempting “to read

into the soul” of some prose writings, according to the interpretive pattern of Positivist Epistemology: Turgenev’s short story *Spring Freshets*, Abbé Prévost’s novel *Manon Lescaut*, and Tolstoy’s novel *Anna Karenina*. After six years, he produces a new book of collective studies—*Romanian and Foreign Writers*—including among contents: an overview of American psychologist William James’s work, some general considerations about the French novelist of the moment Marcel Proust, about Ladislas Reymont—the Polish author of Nobel Prize novel *The Peasants*, about Thomas Hardy, Max Nordau, and Anatole France. In the same year, these “Marginal Notes” are melting in the substance of the critical essay *Creation and Analysis*, initially published in *Viața Românească*. Through this kind of device with many retorts, as we could represent Ibrăileanu’s way to do, the most relevant international works are not only put into circulation in the Romanian cultural field, but they also contribute to clarify a specific method of analysis, governed by causally determinism.

After defending his Ph.D. thesis in Paris, Ralea returned to his home country—enlarged after the First World War—and continued working with frenzy at *Viața Românească*. His experience abroad had left an indelible mark on him; almost mesmerized by the extremely profitable contact with the Western academia, which he had to abandon because of a lack of adequate financial resources for a decent life, Ralea tried to resolve his anger in his articles.

In the second half of 1923, he ended his correspondence from the capital of France and from Germany—his letters appeared under the columns “Scrisori din Paris” [“Letters from Paris”] and “Scrisori din Germania” [“Letters from Germany”]—, but continued to write for *Viața Românească*, producing various articles, studies and reviews, and contributing to “Cronica filozofică” [“Philosophical Reviews”], “Cronica socială” [“Social Panorama”], “Cronica ideilor” [“An Overview of Ideas”], and “Miscellanea.” He submitted and disseminated information, drafted analyses, delivered comments and engaged in polemics. Since 1924, in a column called “Disociații” [“Disociations”], Ralea adopted the style of French moralists in order to express his personal opinions about various facets of human nature; in the early 1930s, these texts will be sent for publication in Bucharest and reproduced in the pages of the weekly *Adevărul literar și artistic*; in 1935, they appeared in a volume entitled *Valori* [Values].

He begins his contributions to “Note pe marginea cărților” with a review of a book by a fellow contributor, Octav Botez, *Pe marginea cărților: Scriitori români și străini* [Annotations: Romanian and Foreign Writers]. In the review, Ralea declares himself impressed by O. Botez’s “modesty,” “objectivity,” “elasticity,” and “universal understanding,” all highlighted by the particular way in which his book is structured. He finds the format of *Pe marginea cărților* extremely productive for critical analysis and very much in the spirit of civilized European discourse. In the first part of the review, Ralea notes:

The title of this volume is a proof of modesty, the same as Mr. O. Botez’s entire literary and editorial activity. *Pe marginea cărților* tries to suggest an

impressionistic approach, a kind of criticism improvised from hasty notes; in fact, the pages devoted to Romanian and foreign writers are among the most astute. (Rev. of *Pe marginea cărților: Scriitori români și străini* 299, my trans.)¹

In the second part of the review, the same Ralea adopts a belligerent attitude, this time in the second phase, of social involvement:

Nothing has proved more excessive in the beginnings of our culture than the cheap buffoonery through which some understood to exhibit their personality, the overinflated subjectivity which lives by exploiting a sad gallery. If you pass through the Latin Quarter or through Montparnasse, in Paris, as you walk by the terraces of cafés, among bizarre costumes and strange masks, you are bound to see all those Levantine losers who sell their brilliant “paradoxes” for a pint of bock beer. This legion of Balkan geniuses has the major secrets of the universe at their fingertips and is willing to share them with anybody. All of them descend from the East. Quite a few of them are of our ranks.

We have had enough of such originality. The Western European spirit which we desire to adopt in our country involves a different mentality, whose defining features are: objectivity, propriety, tactfulness and good taste.

Subjectivity is the seal of the barbarian. We haven’t got rid of it yet. (Rev. of *Pe marginea cărților: Scriitori români și străini* 299-300)

The issues Ralea chooses to debate highlight the vast knowledge he was bringing into the Romanian cultural space, in the service of the ideology of *Viața Românească*. Thus, Ralea writes with interest, competence and style on a variety of topics: Marcel Proust; a psychology course published by C. Rădulescu-Motru; the Labour Party—“Partidul laburist, structură și tendințe” [“The Labor Party: Its Structure and Its Trends”]; the idea of time in modern conscience; Einstein and Bergson; *La cousine Bette* [*Cousin Bette*]; “Formarea ideii de personalitate” [“The Formation of the Idea of Personality”]; Fromentin’s *Dominique*; ideological militancy; “Democrație și creație” [“Democracy and Creation”]; the social status of modern women, etc.

It would be naïve to believe that these “reading notes” are mere samples of gratuitous *intellectual Epicureanism*. One of the most dissimulated ideological strategists, Ralea plans his moves so as to bring more visibility to his progressive ideas, and gaining with each intervention more and more influence in the circle of *Viața Românească*, under Ibrăileanu’s direction. At the same time, he joins *Ideea Europeană*, the Bucharest equivalent of *Viața Românească*, renewing his respect for Rădulescu-Motru, who happens to be the senior editor of the publication.

Interpretări [*Interpretations*] (Bucharest, 1927), Ralea’s first book on literature, is published immediately after Ibrăileanu’s collected studies, *Scriitori români și străini* [*Romanian and Foreign Writers*] (Jassy, 1926). Comparing the two tables of contents, we cannot help noticing the reversed arrangement of the parts: unlike Ibrăileanu, Ralea chooses to write about foreign writers first, and Romanian writers afterwards. Another

salient aspect is that most Romanian authors discussed in the volume are writers, critics and contributors from the area of influence of *Viața Romînească*. In the foreign writers’ department, the names listed are a selection from the canon of universal literature, in consonance with the tenets and literary tastes of those gathered around the magazine main critic. The contemporary authors Ralea writes about (Proust, Thomas Hardy, Anatole France, Rilke), as well as the classic ones (Balzac) were equally discussed, in analytical and descriptive ways, by Ralea’s mentor, Ibrăileanu; moreover, Ralea is not the only one of the younger critics, better attuned to the Western culture, who writes about this particular lot of foreign writers; others, such as D.I. Suchianu, share the same interest.

On the one hand, as early as 1920, in a letter from Paris, Ralea called the Romanian readers’ attention to Proust (“Scrisori din Paris” 291).² On the other hand, Suchianu helped to popularize Hardy (220-26), much to Ibrăileanu’s delight, since even on his deathbed, and despite the overwhelming physical pain and great political concerns, Ibrăileanu still managed to find some peace and atonement in the soothing universes of his favorite writers, as O. Botez remembers:

We would discuss matters of national and global politics, we would talk about the future, about the bleak recent developments in Europe, about Soviet Russia, whose recent evolution he was particularly impassioned about, but would quickly return to his beloved writers: Tolstoy, Proust, Hardy, Turgenev, France, Maupassant—whose lack of depth he was aware of, but for whom he still had a soft spot, dating back to his days as a young man. We would talk about Panait Istrati’s uneven storytelling, though Ibrăileanu thought there were some “Shakespearian” pages to be found in *Neranțula*. (“Amintiri despre Ibrăileanu” 81)

For Ralea’s and Suchianu’s generation, “Note pe marginea cărților” illustrates a method of analysis whose turn from magazine information to scientific material had already taken place at the time when O. Botez’s book was published; the shift is mentioned and discussed in O. Botez’s foreword:

These notes and observations, written over a period of ten years, for *Viața Romînească*, *Însemnări literare*, *Gândirea*, do not include any value judgments or appraisals sprung out of some narrow aesthetic dogmatism, neither are they mere fleeting and whimsical impressions. What I aimed to prove by writing them, with all the acumen and objectivity one can resort to in this delicate field of research, was the fact that behind the work there is a writer, and I attempted to define his general physiognomy, as well as his personal attitude towards life. It seems to me that this approach is the common denominator of these disparate attempts which I had the naïveté to think not entirely useless, at least to a category of readers and, in particular, to the studious Romanian youth.

Therefore, the vagueness of “Note pe marginea cărților” is finally dispelled: the purpose is understanding the writer’s personal and social creative behavior by studying the way he/she manifests himself/herself in literary works, which articulate a particular vision on life, i.e. express an ideological stance by artistic means. Later, in 1942, when he republished a substantial part of *Interpretări* under the new title of *Înțelesuri* [Meanings], Ralea invoked in the preface this same justification for bringing together disparate articles: “All have in common the concern to capture the essential line of thought developed by this or that artistic figure.”

In the period in which he published *Interpretări*, Ralea manifested himself as a descendant of Émile Faguet, who saw the practice of reading as a form of art—“Knowing how to read [...] is an art and there is an art of reading” (7). To strengthen his point, Faguet invokes Sainte-Beuve’s view of the critic as a competent reader: “A critic is an individual who knows how to read and teaches others how to do it as well” (qtd. in Faguet 7).

The author of *Interpretări* reveals his European mind frame through his openness towards many fields of knowledge, not just literature. He takes a stance as a reader-critic, i.e. an *efficient* reader, and aspires to become a critic-reader, i.e. a *responsible* reader.

In *Interpretări*, Ralea writes about Proust, adjusting the previous erroneous interpretation he made in “Scrisori din Paris”, and centering the discourse on the influence of Jewishness in the construction of the literary product. Proustianism is now deemed to be a social phenomenon, a “fashion.” Using this observation as his starting point, Ralea takes into account various aspects, such as biographical data, the Bergsonian episteme and personal identity determiners (gender, social environment, family, race), in order to establish the value of the concept, described as a potentially powerful form of stylistic modernization:

This “Bergsonian feel” to Proust’s novels characterizes more than one side of his work. We can understand the rest only if we take into account Proust’s Jewish origin. *The Jew is usually a snob.* Forming a despised minority in almost all countries, although strong through his intellect, his fortune, and the endurance of his race, an absurd tradition demands that when a Jew has the honor of being received into polite society, he should be considered a member of a race of upstarts. Therefore, unconsciously, no one aspires to create ties with the rank and fashion, with the great men of the day, with the celebrities of the moment more than the Jew. (*Interpretări* 18)

Very dependent on the historical context of the’40’s that discusses the differences among the people in racial terms, Ralea goes on to show that “[t]here are a lot of Jewish types in Proust’s work: Bloch, the distasteful snob; Rachel, the young courtesan; the grandmother; the mother; but especially Swann (who is Proust himself—his alias described him so well)” (*Interpretări* 20); “[i]n their rush to better their lives, enemies of conservatism and partisans of change, the sons of Israel betray even in their writing style the impatient fever of waiting for tomorrow, and so does Proust” (*Interpretări* 27).

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In “Note despre Rainer Maria Rilke” [“Notes on Rainer Maria Rilke”], the Romanian essayist writes about the “Absolute Poet,” resorting to scientific incursions into physiology, child psychology, and the analysis of the “romantic soul,” described as introvert, obsessive, and mystical:

Others can be poets plus a random epithet: poets of ideas, descriptive poets, free verse poets, musical poets, etc. Rilke was “the Poet” *par excellence*; he was only a poet, the poet-poet, so to speak. To him, a poem was a theory of knowledge, an ethics, and an aesthetic. It was everything. He both created and lived his art. His biography reflects the Poet’s eternal destiny. His pilgrimage from one place to another is an everlasting canvas of reveries. In order to understand life and the world, everybody else resorts to sensations, images or ideas. He, on the other hand, had the dream. (*Interpretări* 40)

Using the author’s mind frame as a starting point for an interpretive structure of his work, the text about Eugène Fromentin and his only novel, *Dominique*, deemed by Ralea “superior to André Gide’s subjective novels” (*Interpretări* 54), focuses on atypical losers, i.e. those who are psychologically balanced and therefore happy, because they settle for very little, having no desire to become Heroes (like the Nietzschean *Übermensch*) or Adaptable Individuals (like Julien Sorel, Stendhal’s hero): “A strong optimism, sprung from a belief in the miraculous healing power of life, forms, in a way, the conclusion of the book” (*Interpretări* 50-51).

The main quality of the text on Balzac and his work *La cousine Bette* is the way Ralea describes the mechanism of socio-historical causes and their analogical literary effects, using the same type of reasoning he used in Proust’s case, when he placed Proust’s literary work in connection with the epistemological philosophy of “permanent mutability” postulated by Bergson:

No one has ever been more exposed to the direct influence of the great philosopher as M. Proust. Others have suffered Bergson’s influence only indirectly, and only in one aspect of their work. But Proust applied Bergson’s ideas about processes, and even his dialectic and his manner of dissecting the soul, in literature, in psychological analysis, in the characters’ relationships. If Bergson had written literature, he would have done it like Proust. (*Interpretări* 8)

Citing Karl Marx’s admiration for Balzac, Ralea detects a “moral affinity” between the two authors—an affinity which determines them to adopt a similar attitude towards the economic situation of the first half of the nineteenth century. Ralea suggests reading Balzac’s novel as a translation of doctrinal abstractions into the sensible images of a literary text:

Crevel would be the concrete illustration of the type envisioned by Marx if, instead of a treatise on political economy, he would have written a novel. Crevel is the man described in the *Capital*: greedy, cheap, boastful, rude, cocky, and above all, obsessed with moneymaking. To him, everything—art, love, knowledge—presents itself in terms of money. (*Interpretări* 62)

In a theoretical preamble to his comment on Hardy's most important novel, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, Ralea places the study of emotional tension in relation to the “function of reality,” a method used by the French psychologist Pierre Janet, whose lectures at Collège de France Ralea had the opportunity to attend during his doctoral studies:

To summarize the French psychologist's ideas, spiritual health is measured by the degree of psychological strain, from the latent state of the inner speech, to desire, and all the way to the fulfilled action itself. The fulfilled action, characterized by the *function of reality*, by a belief in reality, constitutes the point of maximum vitality and energy. The more a man dives into reality and believes in it, the healthier he is. On the contrary, irrational fantasies, subjectivity, hyper-analytical processes, and introspection all correspond to a lower level of emotional tension. (*Interpretări* 73-74)

After converting Hardy's clinical file into a reading tool, Ralea describes the English writer as “a soul apart. [...] External projection is his main trait” (*Interpretări* 74). To a psychologist, such a character is emblematic for the conventional scale of normal states of mind—unlike egomaniacal souls, living only in themselves and for themselves—, because he exudes health, generosity and resilience in the face of destiny, all instilled by the Protestant doctrine of predestination: “Were I to define Hardy by contrast, I would indicate Maurice Barrès with his *culte du moi*, Proust or Amiel, eternally turning their gaze inwards; their characters are the exact opposites of Thomas Hardy's” (*Interpretări* 75).

“La moartea lui Anatole France” [“At the Death of Anatole France”] is part of a special issue of *Viața Românească* (Oct. 1924),³ dedicated to the memory of the emblematic writer of humanist and anticlerical academism. How does his genius look like, how does it manifest itself? How does a *person* become a *person of distinction*? Why do the mechanical devices of Nature allow exceptions? Ralea ponders over these questions and, drawing on his familiarity with social Darwinism, arrives to the conclusion that this genius of the Belle-Époque, “the Great Master” Anatole France, was defined by composure, harmony, and serenity, in stark contrast with the romantic genius, who dreamed of revolutions. France was a superior spirit—not a revolutionary or a genetic mutant, but an element of continuity in the general flow towards spiritual progress:

There is revolution and there is evolution; there is mutation and there is slow transformation. Both paths can lead to progress. We used to believe that a genius is a powerful eruption, with the violence of a hurricane, an explosion which occurs

as suddenly as a meteor hit, and manifests itself especially through discontinuity, by breaking with the past, with tradition, with the historical moment in which the author happens to live. From this point of view, Anatole France is not a genius. [...] Anatole France is a normal product of nature, of that type of evolution which has no doubts about its good direction. He was not perceived as a strange curiosity, because his genius had been prepared by millennia of civilization, with patience and care. By summarizing in his soul all previous attempts made by people to break away from themselves, he became richer than the most catastrophic geniuses confined in a haunting and unique experience. He is an entire world, an entire humanity, the way that Goethe (his only precursor, all differences considered), wanted to be. Without having to break the continuity, the Great Master is a position in a series; occupying the most recent position, he might be surpassed tomorrow. (Ralea, “La moartea lui Anatole France” 90-91)

Ralea started observing André Gide in 1920. In a letter published in *Viața Românească*, under the column “Scrisori din Paris”, in the 8th issue of the year, excited by the intense cultural life of the French capital, Ralea, Sorbonne Ph.D. candidate at the time, informs the Romanian public that “André Gide is one of the most original and remarkable talents of contemporary France. The mixture of religious mysticism, idealism and pure aesthetic refinement, in the manner of Oscar Wilde and Théophile Gautier, gives him a unique personality. [...] A must-read” (290-291). Until 1926, when he published an article about Gide in *Viața Românească*—also included in *Interpretări*—, Ralea followed his literary trajectory, trying to surpass the situations of critical doubt by using the works of French literature specialists, like Jacques Rivière and Henry Massis. However, given the contrast between Rivière and Massis, their perceptions only increased the confusion. Rivière exalts Gide’s value, while Massis, from the standpoint of Catholic morality, presented Gide as a devil.

Therefore, in *Interpretări*, Gide becomes a source of contradiction, a sum of opposites: “[i]n Gide collide the man from the North and the man from the South” (106), his father’s Catholicism and his mother’s Protestant background, ancient Greek paganism and a form of Christianity with mystical overtones, “nationalism and internationalism, the doctrine which recognizes the national specificity of the work of art and the doctrine which speaks of the need for national influences” (107), “the theorist who declares that the work of art is perfectly useless, foreign to social aspirations, and [...] the same theorist who brilliantly proves that the work of art carries the social ideals of the public” (107).

The salvation of this “overlooked genius” (*Interpretări* 116), whom Ralea analyses by breaking down into pieces “the deep-seated irregularities of soul” (116), comes through the power of the socio-historical context. Inspired by Ernst Robert Curtius, Ralea credits the idea of a “revolutionary” Gide, in the sense that “he never gives us a new set of moral principles; he merely prepares the ground for the ones to come. He is the Apostle of the provisional period of the early post-war years, when all contemporary values are rejected, and the new values are still about to come” (117).

Ralea's text on Paul Valéry is a tribute to the utmost importance of the producer-product relationship, which reminds us of American theorist J. Hillis Miller's understanding of "the ethics of reading." J. Hillis Miller's ethics of reading concerns legitimizes consistency in the manifestation of competence—a delicate issue when several disciplines combine to give the full scope of a given notional sphere. Embracing the French theoretical paradigm, Ralea considers that only a pure poet, epitomized by Valéry, is able to write pure poetry, i.e. poetry characterized by "intellectualism and classicism." But what should the critics do, what kind of criticism should they practice in order to capture such elusive concepts like Poetry? How can one explain the Beautiful? Ralea notes: "The critics never feel as powerless in performing their mission as when they have to explain what is beautiful in a form of art," and goes on to say: "How is it possible to divide into pieces, by the dissecting operation of analysis, what is beautiful, when the Beautiful is simply everywhere? When you scrutinize and explain something, you stabilize it, you mollify it, you kill it" (*Interpretări* 128). In Ralea's conception, this deadlock can be overcome only if "the reader [...] goes straight to the source" (*Interpretări* 128).

In the end, it is appropriate to ask ourselves if the method of reading and interpreting literary texts professed in the pages of *Viața Românească*, under the column titled "Note pe marginea cărților," has any ethical purport. In particular, do Ralea's *Interpretări* respond to an ethics, since his interpretations make use of an entire arsenal of knowledge gathered from various scientific and cultural domains? For Hillis Miller's kind of fundamentalism—in fact, a manifestation of totalitarianism in the field of literary hermeneutics, through its attempt to isolate literary studies from the outside world—, this type of reading might not be ethical, since "the meaning of a text" is not to be "measured and established by something non-textual, brought from the outside: God or other transcendent power, society, history, economic conditions, the author's psychology, the 'real-life inspiration' of the text" (29). This view contrasts with the democratic and tolerant way in which Ralea envisages the position of the literary critic, seen as a "creator of new points of view in relation to a literary work" ("Despre critica literară" ["On Literary Criticism"] 80).

However, Ralea's *Interpretări* do have a connection with ethics: the ethics of sociological readings. In a letter from Paris, dated May 10th 1923, Ralea replied to Professor Ion Petrovici, who had offered him the position of teaching assistant for his course on the history of philosophy at the University of Jassy. The letter mentions, among other things, the perspective from which Ralea intends to prove his competence:

It is more than likely that I shall settle in Jassy, especially since I've promised Mr. Ibrăileanu to join the editorial board of *Viața Românească*. I will do my best to measure up to the position you are offering me. Nevertheless, my specialty is another: sociology. [...] Since I came here four years ago, I have directed all my efforts towards the discipline of social sciences (The Romanian Academy Library Archives, Folder 1, 8 July 2014).

From this standpoint, since they voice the opinions of a sociologist, Ralea’s *Interpretări* are entirely ethical, recalling the sociologist’s idea of *creative criticism*⁴ in order to tackle the social field of literature.

NOTES

¹ All subsequent translations are mine.

² See also Cornelia Ștefănescu 191.

³ Apart from Ralea, G. Ibrăileanu and O. Botez write about Anatole France as well.

⁴ Decades apart, in line with Ralea’s assessments are some considerations made by Mircea Martin in his book *Dicțiunea ideilor* [The Diction of Ideas] (244, 258).

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