*In memoriam*
**Matei Călinescu**

# Mircea Ivănescu, a Poet's Poet

MATEI CĂLINESCU

Born in 1931, Mircea Ivănescu made his debut with a volume unassumingly titled *versuri* (*lines*) in 1968. The volumes that followed bore similarly neutral, unassuming titles, and this may have contributed to the fact that his powerfully original but self-effacing presence in Romanian poetry was truly discovered, with a few exceptions, only in the 1980s and 1990s, by the postmodern generation of poets who acknowledged him as a major precursor. No wonder then that the first comprehensive anthology of his poetry was put together by the *chef de file* of Romanian postmodern critics and theorists, Ion Bogdan Lefter, in 1996. What the postmoderns particularly admire in Mircea Ivănescu is his self-reflective playfulness, his ironic bookishness, his distinctive use of a poetics of citation and of intertextuality, his mind-bending manipulations of ekphrasis or *mise-en-abyme*, his subtly poetic prosaisms and his revaluations of stock-phrases and clichés encountered in popular literary genres, on which he manages to bestow an unexpected, if ambiguous, metaphysical dignity. Given the constancy and richness of his poetic production, one can only be amazed by Ivănescu's parallel activity as a translator, from English (Joyce's *Ulysses*, six novels by Faulkner, two by Scott Fitzgerald etc.) and from German (Musil's *Man without Qualities*, Kafka's short stories, *Journal*, and *Correspondence*, Hermann Broch's *Sleepwalkers* etc.). It is noteworthy that a comprehensive anthology of American poetry compiled and translated by himself (1986) was withdrawn from circulation during the communist dictatorship of N. Ceaușescu. The reason? The cover reproduced Jasper Johns' *American Flag* at a moment when American symbols (even in a pop-art version) were unfavorably looked upon. One has the impression that in the case of Mircea Ivănescu the borderline between effectively translating and just reading is very fluid.

Almost always present at the center of Mircea Ivănescu's poetry – which may be broadly classified as a form of "love poetry" – with a difference that can go all the way to self-irony and exquisite self-mockery – is *She,* a woman or the mere "shadow of her loneliness," an object of love on the part of an extremely self-conscious poet or, sometimes, the victim of some nameless crime of which the poet himself feels ultimately (magically) guilty. *She* is usually evoked in a cold, rainy, wintery landscape – or, also during winter, in anxiety-pervaded interiors, both familiar and strange, easily recognized by the sophisticated reader of detective fiction or thrillers. The poet takes pleasure in exploring what is not said in such popular works, in discovering the metaphysical implications of their silences and gaps, in identifying both with the detective and the criminal. But *She* is always there: even more intensely present in her absence.

The poem I intend to discuss here – typical of a significant part of Ivănescu's world – is made up of a series of seven sonnets and is written in English by the multilingual poet: "the

lady in the lake" (*would-be poems*, Sibiu: Hermann, 1992, limited edition). I should note in passing that Ivănescu writes almost exclusively in lower case (like e.e. cummings) and that, while the bulk of his poetry is naturally in Romanian, he has also extensively written and translated himself in French and in English. For a reader who is aware of the often invisibly bookish and highly intertextual quality of Ivănescu's poetry, the title, "the lady in the lake," taken by itself, might seem to contain a triple allusion. Given the poet's vast culture, one may think that it somehow points to the medieval-romantic poem by Walter Scott, *The Lady of the Lake* (1810) (not a right guess). Then, it might point, however indirectly, to Tennyson's adaptations of the legendary motif of the Lady of the Lake in *The Idylls of the King* (again a false track, although suggestions from the arthurian cycle may be identified in other poems by Ivănescu). Third, it points – literally and this time rightly – to *The Lady in the Lake* by Raymond Chandler (1943) and perhaps to the 1947 Robert Montgomery film noir, based on the novel, which the author might have seen. (Incidentally, I happen to know that Ivănescu is a great Chandler fan). Even so, in the poem, Chandler is present only as a remote, very vague background, helpful only insofar as it helps the reader focus on the theme of murder, central but half-hidden and thus easily overlooked. "the lady in the lake" is essentially a convoluted love poem, delicate and cruel, at once (self)parodic and lyrical, doubled by a meditation on time – time moving both clock-wise and counter-clockwise: "The story could be told the other way round," we read in "sonnet 4", which reveals the crime: going from Sunday to Saturday to Friday – "…a blank day…" – to Thursday, "…the eve of the murder" (the murderer is of course the poet himself, but his weapons are unconventional: memory and forgetfulness).

"the lady in the lake" is a fine example of Ivănescu's approach to poetry, secretly erudite and playfully poignant, ironically sincere, in which certain apparent or oblique references are just pieces of a larger lyrical puzzle with many solutions, each one of them quite rigorous. Another example could be the opening poem of his first volume, *versuri*, translated into English by Ștefan Stoenescu (with the help of the author) in the collection Mircea Ivănescu, *other poems, other lines* (Bucharest: Eminescu Publishing House, 1983). Here is the poem, titled "but there are also true memories," which sets the tone of his subsequent poetry:

i too once carried a memory
in my hands, holding it tightly, for fear it might escape.
(it had slipped from me once – and it rolled down
onto the ground. i carefully brushed it with my coat's sleave,
i was not afraid. My memories are rubber balls –
they never break. If they slipped out of my hands
however, they might roll away quite at a distance –
but i'm loath to run after them, to try to reach out
beyond my boundaries, stretching my hand,
ever downwards to chase my memory.
i'd rather pick up another. this too might be a fake one.)
and so i too once carried a memory
in my arms – (thinking awhile, a spiteful grin

on my face, of I can't remember whom in a celebrated book
who was carrying his own head in hell, lighting his way
thereby). after all, isn't it the same thing?

The final three lines project a retroactive light on the beginning of the poem, not unlike, in hell, the cut off head carried by Dante's character lights his way – to where? Memories (true or false: no difference between them) may seem to be rubber balls; in fact, each one is the result of a beheading of a multiple "I.". The successive metaphors (memory = rubber ball; memory = cut off head) suggest a movement from play (the ball, a plaything that rolls down onto the ground) to hell and death, in an unavoidable circle. The initial "too," repeated just before the ending lines, conveys this sense of circularity in the simplest and most discreet way. The profound theme is, again, the life-and-death fight between memory and forgetfulness.

The second piece in *other poems, other lines,* "playmate," introduces the woman (nameless here, but having a multiplicity of names and identities later on) with whom – without ever saying it – the poet is, always phantasmatically and always ambivalently, in love:

a winter tale – as, stealthily,
i slipped behind her – and all of a sudden I raised
the lamp in my right hand, holding it exactly above her.
her body was inscribed within the golden spot
of the light. Like an illuminated letter in an old ms., etc.

A master of what one might call "transparent ambiguity," Ivănescu is without doubt a poet's poet. But also, endowed with a Borgesian memory and wile, he is a reader's reader, an imaginative commentator in verse (poetic, antipoetic) of other poets (some of his favorites: W.B. Yeats, the Eliot of "Prufrock," the Pound of *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*, e.e. cummings, Dylan Thomas, W.H. Auden, etc.), of fiction (from Joyce and Nabokov to Mickey Spillane), of philosophy (from Plato to Kierkegaard to Sartre, whose name is once derisively turned into "Sartrone", as if he were a character in I don't know what Italian opera), mixed with everyday occurrences and clichés of ordinary language. Like Borges, he is cursed (or blessed?) to carry in his mind a huge literary encyclopedia, made up of verbatim quotations not less detailed than the shape of the clouds on a specific day in 1894, as recalled by *Funes el memorioso*.

*She* – who often becomes *you* – is a sort of *donna angelicata* surrounded by Kierkegaardian seducers, potential poetic murderers, timid adorers or worshippers, Hoffmannesque dreamers, petty recriminators, forgetful, ungrateful, fickle lovers, lustful perverts or naïve adolescents in (unrequited) love – all of these personae being equally candid self-inventions and reinventions of the mysterious poet's deep self. In my view, Mircea Ivănescu is the greatest – and most discrete in his greatness – of living Romanian poets.

# An epochal synthesis

MIRCEA MARTIN

Upon his departure from Romania, in 1973, Matei Călinescu was leaving behind an important literary work and a first class intellectual reputation. As a reputed University professor, a literary historian, an essay and prose writer and also a poet, he was promising to reiterate G. Călinescu's wide-ranging creative experience, on whose work he had commented with incisive affinity (see *Aspecte literare* i.e. Literary Aspects, Bucharest, 1965). He made his debut with a book about Eminescu, *Titan and Genius in Eminescu's poetry* (Titanul și geniul în poezia lui Eminescu, Bucharest, 1964).

Yet, right from his debut, it was noticeable that Matei Călinescu's distinct way of conceiving exegesis differed from that of his illustrious name-sake. He chose to stay very close to the text and avoid not just the sparkle of some risky analogies but, mostly, the seductions of the artistic style. His later books were to confirm and even theorise such an attitude. The rigour and the poetry of criticism are defined in memorable words and, we can be sure, they would have been quoted on countless occasions in our literary magazines had his oeuvre not fallen under the incidence of communist censorship after leaving the country: "If the poet has wings, which he flaps spectacularly covering wide open spaces in the process, the true critic, walking the geometrical boulevards of science with sobriety has, despite this modest guise, inwardly grown wings: wings that expand in the world of ideas thus allowing the critic to retrace, on a different plan, the poet's mysterious itinerary"[1].

The lesson in rigour, stylistic sobriety and dissociative passion for ideas is undoubtedly caught on by Matei Călinescu from Tudor Vianu, whom he had known since adolescence, and whose assistant he was for the last years of his academic career. In *Memories in Dialogue* (Amintiri în dialog, Bucharest, 1994), a book he wrote together with Ion Vianu, Călinescu recognises this spiritual ascendancy. As a young critic and researcher, Matei Călinescu's interest in elucidating some of the major concepts in literary theory and history is undoubtedly linked to the encouragement received from and the example set by this illustrious aesthetician. The same goes for his habit of drawing a historical time-scale of the concepts being researched, or the pleasure he took in competently refining literary analysis until the discovery and formulation of a new conceptualising issue. Matei Călinescu retraces the history of a given concept while he himself conceptualises further concepts with similar ease. There is no need to call on his wider studies on classicism or about the *fantastic* to document this assertion since any of his essays can serve as a testimony in this respect. A conceptualising dimension characterises his comments on the works created by well-known writers from home or abroad, and on contemporary literature.

Though he steps aside from literary criticism *per se* rather early (much like Tudor Vianu does too), only to return sporadically from then on, Matei Călinescu still makes a decisive contribution towards launching and helping bring to prominence some of the Romanian literature's most important writers of the '60s generation. Mircea Ivănescu, Nichita Stănescu, Cezar Baltag or Nicolae Breban – these are some of the authors which the young critic had wagered a bet on. Beyond his ongoing critical commentaries, his works as a comparatist and exegete of classical and modern Romanian literature turned him into a central character of the Romanian literary scene during the '60s. Without actually seeking it, through assiduous publicising or wheeling and dealing as some of peers did, Matei Călinescu enjoyed a true authority amongst Romanian writers.

His last major contribution before choosing the exile was *The Modern Concept of Poetry* (published in 1971 and 1972) a book that also served as his PhD thesis. The continuity of his (intellectual) pursuit apparent between this book and the following one, written in English and published in the United States, *Five Faces of Modernity* (Indiana U.P., 1977) is most evident. In actual fact, this was only natural since, by the age of 35, when Călinescu reaches Indiana University in Bloomington, as a Romanian language and literature lecturer, he was already a seasoned intellectual, learned, an erudite even who had travelled around Europe (a UNESCO scholarship offering him research residency in Paris and London). He already had an established demeanour and a personal outlook on literature, both of whom were of a markedly Olympian structure (and character). Judging by his rather haughty detachment from all ideologies and, in view of the ironical reservations he held against any type of (cultist) adhesion, I do not think Călinescu would have suffered any cultural shock upon entering the American way of life. Nor do I think he had any difficulty in adapting to it.

In fact, in just a few years' time, he becomes full professor and, at the same time, a comparative literary and cultural critic whose competency starts being noticed. The invitations he receives from other Universities, the research bursaries he receives, his participation at various international congresses and his employment on the boards of prestigious literary magazines confirm his full integration into the American scientific and academic community, and the beginnings of a truly international notoriety.

Would all of this have been possible had he stayed in Romania? Would his oeuvre had looked differently then? These questions' sole purpose is to prepare a third one, also rhetorical: would our author's American oeuvre have been possible without its Romanian counterpart?

Matei Călinescu is not the only *literati* who fulfilled his career in the United States. Alongside him, prestigious university professors and authors of internationally-renowned works, such as Virgil Nemoianu, Toma Pavel, Sanda Golopenția, Mihai Spăriosu or Marcel Pop-Corniș stand up to be counted. Is there something that unites them while setting them apart from their American peers? Is there a common source, pertaining to their Romanian cultural formation that can still be detected in their works? Or, is it that their Romanian foundation melts into something *more* comprehensive, European, whereby this latter constitutive element is what sets it apart? These are but some of the questions to which only a very close comparative study of each and every one of these personalities and their oeuvres, considered in their American context, may give an answer.

In respect to Matei Călinescu's oeuvre, the continuity between its two eras and their particular aspects is not merely thematic, for this is also methodological. In both his *Modern Concept of Poetry* and *Five Faces of Modernity*, the author considers, beyond definitions and concepts, the artistic endeavour's theoretical implications *per se*. His preoccupation for terminology, which is most evident here, is recognisable not just in his *Modern Concept of Poetry*, but in other Romanian works too, whilst, in turn, his etymological curiosity precedes this. Somewhere in his *Critical Essays* (Bucharest, 1967) book, the author speaks of a "poetic side" to etymology.

Surely, today, this modern poetry book would have been conceived by Matei Călinescu differently. For instance, the synthetic chapter on symbolist poetry would no longer be placed *after* the chapter in which "the poetic origins of antipoetic" is approached, nor would Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot be considered *concurrently*, in symbolist posterity. Beyond such changes of perspective, certain interpretive constants can be established between *The Modern Concept of Poetry* and *Five Faces of Modernity*, only if to reveal the comments made on Baudelaire's attitude towards modernity or, the revolutionary character of Rimbaud's poetics. They are in fact, and in the nature of things, similar to their appealing to the very same fundamental quotations.

Certain replays leave themselves open to interpretation on a different level, too. Quoting – in both these works – Genette's thesis on the *literality* of poetic language shows our critic's permanent consideration of these things in that the sole valid and authentic interpretation of a text rests with its literal interpretation. This type of interpretation is the only one respecting the text's immanence. Yet, how can the text's immanence be respected other than by repeating it or by actually rereading it (anew)? Are we mistaken in considering these 1972 excerpts as being germinative for the massive work that Matei Călinescu will publish twenty years later, in 1992, on *Rereading*, Yale U.P., 1992)?

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The author titles this book as "an intellectual history and cultural genealogy essay". Indeed, his approach here goes way beyond the strictly literary framework by getting involved in debates where philosophy, sociology and the history of ideas and mentalities are brought to the fore in equal measure. How have concepts like *modernity*, *avant-garde* (i.e. vanguard), *decadence*, *kitsch* or *postmodernism* been formed and to what extent were they functional in any of the Euro-Atlantic cultural evolutionary periods – this is the main thrust of his endeavour. Matei Călinescu declares at one point how, in actual fact, his (research) interest is the same one exhibited by a physiologist, a genealogist and/or that of an etiologist even.

The history which this synthesis reconstitutes here is not a literary one, for it is conceptual. It is evidently apparent the indirect, mediated approach to artistic reality, which is a rather frustrating evidence given the fact that the critic's analytical virtues are no longer exercised against the works *proper* in the oeuvre. They are nevertheless employed against the terms and ideas whose complex intertwining is followed, with erudite finesse and abstract accuracy, by someone like Jean Starobinski.

Major concepts are generally considered at least on two different levels: socio-political and culturally-artistic, and in cases where the historical context requires it, the last section is, in turn, further divided. The division is nevertheless imperative given that terms can mean different things, in different contexts. Yet, in the case of personalities, an exegete's ("archaeological") effort is to uncover the coherence and the parallels drawn between, say, political and artistic considerations.

I wish to draw the reader's attention to a procedural detail: Matei Călinescu offers careful consideration not just to the history of a particular concept but also, to the way its sequence of acceptations have shaped, at various moments in time, its currently accepted version – which has a predominantly artistic value. What is even more interesting to note is the fact that the act of retracing the term's (conceptual) progress towards its current understanding does not alter its so-called final evolutionary imprint, and does not attenuate its constituting radicalism; on the contrary, it brings to the fore its (intrinsic) value even more.

Beyond chronological factors, the bond tying Matei Călinescu's considered concepts rests with the fact that these "reflect intellectual attitudes directly linked to the concept of time". The implication here, of course, is that this is not the philosopher's or the scientific community's *time*, for it is the human time which is about "the sense of history as it is lived and evaluated culturally" (*supra*, p. 10).

One more thing: though the author's investigation is opened to several different levels of considering the existence as such and (its) culture, its major thrust is cultural. The "faces" of modernity are, each and every one of them, multiple yet, this very modernity is, if not first and foremost then, at least in the final analysis, aesthetical.

Not solely the massive introductory chapter but all the remaining ones – and, in particular, the chapter on decadence – offer Matei Călinescu the chance to undertake edifying incursions into the history of artistic and literary doctrines while making pertinent considerations about modernity's highly complex composition. Each time, the author's substantiating analysis converges towards the idea that each and every one of the concepts and movements listed in the book's content form an inalienable component of this modernity.

As the critical commentary's density and the multitude of references and dissociations on display make it (virtually) impossible to analyse the book in its entirety, I believe that focusing on a single chapter could be revealing for the book's overall consistency. The reason why if I am focusing on the *idea of avant-garde* here, owes to my considering this to be (for a whole host of reasons) the book's main conceptual hub and one which has very close connections with the rest of the concepts presented (modernism and decadentism, on the one hand, and kitsch and postmodernism, on the other).

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The term *avant-garde*'s first time appearance is traced by Matei Călinescu during the *Renaissance*. He credits the French humanist, Étienne Pasquier with it because of the comments this makes on the erudite linguistic and poetic performance of the (16th-century French Renaissance poets' group) *La Pléiade*. Starting now, the rectilinear representation of time and

the sense of advancement and progress become present. Yet, beyond the metaphorical transfer proper, what is significant though is its application in the literary domain. Yet, this early use of the term is nevertheless lacking the proper conscience needed to belong to the vanguard. In order for this term to signify a conscious option and an assumed programme too, it had to be adopted in politics; moreover, it had to consider the role which it was willing to invest in art and the artists.

Even if Matei Călinescu's remark is intriguing at first, eventually, it comes to pass: "Though it can be found in the generic language of the war, the modern notion of 'vanguard' is more akin to the language, the theory and the practice of a relatively recent type of war, [namely] the revolutionary civil war" (supra, p.69). This rings true, for is it not so that extremism and experimentalism define any revolution? The word *vanguard* has become "common ground for revolutionary rhetoric" (supra, p.74), with the added mention that, in the Leninist-Stalinist idiom, its use in any other contexts but political was viewed as a "blasphemy".

Though it seems that, at the time of the Paris Commune, a duality existed between the political and artistic avant-gardes, if only the example set by Rimbaud is considered, later, the principled incompatibility between revolutionary social activism and revolutionary art forms becomes ever more evident, despite the temporary self-delusion of certain socially aware creators. Renato Poggioli speaks in *The Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Harvard University Press, 1981) about a "divorce" between these two manifestations of the avant-garde, though Matei Calinescu is of the opinion that the distance separating them is not "unbridgeable" (supra, p.77), at least when it comes to the so-called "historical" avant-garde.

In fact, the historicization of the avant-garde concept happens (virtually) everywhere in post-war Europe, where *neo-avant-garde* phenomena (*Neo-Avant-Garde*, Avantgarde Critical Studies, ed. David Hopkins, 2006) appear, in various social and political contexts. The most spectacular event taking place after the war though, was the recuperation of the *avant-garde* by the bourgeois society, despite so many revolutionary manifests and the contempt shown for every one of its values: "the avant-garde, whose limited popularity had been for long based exclusively on scandalous actions, suddenly becomes one of the major cultural myths of the '50s and '60s" (*supra*, p. 82).

In the avant-garde's genetic make-up itself though, had been inscribed its failure through its success, and because of this success. This surprising equation, much like the movement's self-contradictory posturing (Hans Magnus Enzensberger) led to what Matei Călinescu considers to be "the crisis of the '60s avant-garde concept". To back up his claims, Angelo Guglielmi, a representative of the "Group 63" in Italy, is quoted as claiming that the notion of avant-garde itself, with all its connotations and soldierly implications, is dated in this day and age of intellectual relativism. Incidentally, the question I'm asking myself though is whether one of the avant-garde's major objectives – beyond the ridiculing of bourgeois values – had not been one of making all values relative. From this point of view, we might say that the *avant-garde* (which does not mean just Breton or Marinetti) "gate-crashed" into an age of permissiveness. It is not surprising in fact, observes Matei Călinescu, that even the neo-avant-gardes who adhered to Marxism practice an "anarchist-type of aesthetics" (*supra*,

p. 88). This anarchist dimension, according to him, confirms "the validity of the more general equation between the cultural avant-garde and the crisis culture" (*supra*, p. 88).

Generically speaking, modernity can undoubtedly be put under the sign of the crisis, and can even be considered as the "culture of crisis". Yet, in the case of the avant-garde, this genetic conditioning is turned into a radical programme. As usual, the critic's defining phrase goes beyond superficial or banal aspects, whilst reaching the essential: "Far from being preoccupied by novelty *per se*, or by novelty in general, the avant-gardes tries in fact to discover or invent new forms, aspects or possibilities offered by the crisis" (*supra*, p. 84). At this particular point of the discussion, the decadentism analogy becomes de rigueur – an analogy which is further supported by a (certain type of) "self-destructive euphoria", recognisable in both movements' manifestations even though they are distinct from one another.

A feature of maximum interest and originality in Matei Călinescu's analysis arises in the relationship he establishes between the advent of the avant-garde phenomenon and "the Human's crisis in the unhallowed modern world". Using Ortega y Gasset's insightful essay as a starting point to the *Dehumanization of Art*, our author attributes the avant-garde's oeuvres a prophetic quality: "Corrupting and often eliminating the human imagery from their works, fragmenting its natural representation, dislocating its syntax, cubists and futurists were, surely, amongst the first artists who became conscious of the fact that the Human itself had become an antiquated concept, and that humanist rhetoric had to be removed" (*supra*, p. 86). Obviously, the Human's crisis started much earlier, with the "death of God" announced by Nietzsche, only to end up – in a similarly apocalyptic note – in the death of the "Human" itself, as was decreed by Foucault yet, within this entire process, the Marxist contribution is not negligible. Calinescu adopts here Althusser's perspective, one of the most important Marxist thinkers of out time, according to which "humanism remains but a mere 'ideology' and in so far as Marxism has proclaimed itself a 'science', it must, logically, adopt an anti-ideological stance and, implicitly, an anti-humanist stance as well" (*supra*, p. 86).

It is this "fundamental ambiguity between science and ideology" that explains, in Matei Călinescu's opinion, the penchant for Marxism exhibited by certain strands of the historical avant-garde or the neo-avant-garde. Humanism's crisis is followed through by a crisis of ideology in general, something which is visible on a number of levels yet, carrying important aesthetical consequences: the refusal of placing value judgements and/or of focusing on a particular scope, both of whom characterise a good deal of the avant-garde art, whether this is older or more up to date.

Where I differ from Matei Călinescu is when I am inclined to see these manifestations as consequences of the humanism's crisis rather than symptoms of an impending crisis of ideology. The ideological factor has always been a value-judgement's inhibitor and, as long as we are ready to accommodate the existence of an ideological plurality or, in other words, the existence of several "reading systems" then, the axiology question can best be avoided or rendered relative. Equally, it is only apparently that ideologies help to maintain a teleological tension; in actual fact, they pulverise the intended scope into (a myriad of) more or less immediate objectives. I tend to believe that this contemporary "anti-teleological orientation" is also driven by humanism's crisis. Of course, this can only be true if we consider humanism

to be something more than just a mere ideology. In other words – and to finish what I was about to say – humanism's crisis is not a particular aspect of ideology's crisis, for it may well be its exact opposite.

Towards the end of this chapter, Matei Călinescu distances himself from a couple of relatively wide-spread mores in American (literary) criticism of conceiving the avant-garde and its rapports with what precedes and follows it. He does this in a sequence, titled *Avant-garde and postmodernism*, which was meant to fill in for the absence of a special presentation of this most recent literary and artistic phenomenon, in the book's initial version, dating from 1977. In fact, post-modernity's arrival or, better said, the debates triggered by it, bring to the fore the sheer distance separating the European and the American representations of this modern revolution.

In the American critique an *equivalency* – this euphemism is used only to avoid calling this *confusion* – is being made between modernism and the avant-garde. The European vision – which Matei Călinescu shares – draws a clear distinction between the two movements, without negating the complex rapports of "dependency and exclusion" that govern their relationship. Our author's argumentation is, arguably, definitive: "As for modernism, regardless of the specific representation of the term in different languages or by different authors, it fails to expresses that sense of Universal and hysterical negation which is so characteristic to the avant-garde. Modernism's anti-traditionalism is, more often than not, subtly traditional. This is why it is so utterly difficult, when viewed from a European perspective, to conceive of authors, such as Proust, Joyce, Kafka, Thomas Mann, T.S. Eliot or Ezra Pound as representatives of the avant-garde" (*supra*, p. 95). Moreover, Matei Călinescu launches a personal hypothesis with regard to viewing the avant-garde as a "parody of modernity", which offers him a chance for an aesthetical reflection of great finesse, as memorable as it is valid in itself, whilst almost detached from its very object. (I wonder whether one cannot talk in these very same terms about postmodernism's parodic qualities as they were primarily exercised against modernism.)

The second approach on which our author's opinions differ (from that of American exegetes) concerns post-modernism, more precisely, with regard to the incorporation of the avant-garde within postmodernism, and the confusions resulting thereof. Paradoxically, both these validations can be found in the books written by the same author, Ihab Hassan, a world-renowned figure for his contribution to defining postmodernism. On the one hand, he includes, in his acceptation of modernism, the historic vanguard and, alongside it, virtually "any movement and almost every personality of some importance to the Western culture, dating from the first half of the [twentieth] century" whilst, on the other hand, he considers postmodernism to be "something that is, largely, an extension and a diversification of the avant-garde, pre-dating The Second World War" (*supra*, p. 97). In other words – whilst somewhat overemphasising the point – we could conclude that, in Hassan's representation (the way Călinescu presents it, without insisting on the contradiction), postmodernism is essentially similar to… modernism. The nucleus of this likening is constituted by the avant-garde itself which, by subsuming or even integrating it into either modernism or postmodernism, the American critic simply eludes it altogether, something which results in

it losing its independent significance and/or specific weight. Whilst this opinion is by no means singular in America, we are probably entitled to see in it a consequence of the fact that American exegetes have simply not been confronted by an avant-garde phenomenon of its European scale and magnitude.

The relatively systematic distinction that Ihab Hassan draws between modernism and postmodernism is therefore unfettered by the avant-garde's distribution in both eras. The subsequent criteria setting the two movements apart are antiformalism (Peirce, James, Holmes) and postmodern anti-elitism. Other benchmarks acquire in postmodernity specific representations and functions that are different from those acquired during the modernist era: urbanism, the technological drive, the de-humanizing effect etc. and, at this particular point in the discussion, Matei Călinescu voices his reservations. Here is but one of them: "The argument according to which the postmodern culture is anti-elitist because it is popular – with particular reference to writers, who are no longer ashamed by the 'bestseller' phenomenon – looks to be an utter sophism. Being popular in this day and age means creating for the market, answering its demands […]. The result of submitting to the market forces is neither elitist, nor anti-elitist (both notions have been overused to the maximum, until they were voided of sense)" (*supra*, p. 98). Even though the validity of this last sentence appears to be questionable, the examples offered by the author seem to have an inbuilt ability to turn this dispute to its advantage: "As regards the truly great artists representing the spirit of postmodernism – such as Beckett or even Pynchon, for example, are – they are no less popular or accessible to the public at large than were the most sophisticated amongst modernist or avant-garde writers" (*supra*, p. 98).

Yet, in the last sequence of his discourse on the avant-garde, Matei Călinescu manages to surprise us: after documenting and publicly defending the existence of an avant-garde concept, distinct from modernism and postmodernism, he seems to take a step back, by seeking refuge in a compromise solution. Without offering any special argumentation to support this claim and despite the fact that he had already made a unitary presentation of both the historical avant-garde and of the neo-avant-garde, he now seems ready to dissociate one from the other by attributing each one of them to either modernism or postmodernism, respectively. Accordingly, he claims that there could now be "a new, postmodern avant-guard", which is also "profoundly intellectualised" (*supra*, p. 98) that could be measured up against "the old avant-guard". What then is there left of the distinct concept of the avant-guard?

A difference between the historical avant-garde and the neo-avant-garde undoubtedly exists yet, these differences are not so striking to allow their separation and subsequent pigeon-holing to other movements. And even if such a net distinction were still imaginable, entitling us to speak of an avant-garde stage in modernism and post-modernism, respectively then, the avant-garde concept itself would become useless.

There are a number of irreducible, incomparable even elements pleading against such a (reductionistic) division. The avant-garde's *anti-aesthetic* (Meyer, Ross)[2] and/or *antiformalist* features distinguish it radically from modernism. (In this succession of ideas the placing of the French "new critique" – and of the French literary theorist, Gérard Genette, in particular – within the postmodern avant-garde frame (*supra*, p. 99) seems ever stranger. Both

"literarity" (Derrida) as well as "literality" are typically modernist concepts.) With regard to the relationship between the avant-garde and postmodernism, the most convincing argument in favour of their firm dissociation is brought by Calinescu himself (even though his argument had been facing the opposite direction) when speaking (according to Leonard Meyer) about "stasis" as being one of the characteristics of contemporary culture.

He is, of course, well-aware of the paradox resulting when placing together the terms *stasis* and *avant-garde*, and he meets the challenge head-on: "One of the telling characteristic of our era, which is revealed by the public condition of the new avant-garde, is that we have become accustomed to change. Even the most extreme artistic experimentations seem to raise far too little interest or enthusiasm. The unpredictable had become predictable. Generally speaking, the ever increasing pace of the changes tends to diminish the relevance of any particular change. The new is no longer new" (*supra*, p. 99). The opposition between the current mentality and the mentality of the historic avant-garde is defined accurately and with much gusto: "The old avant-garde, destructively, sometimes deceived itself into believing there really were new avenues to be opened up, new realities to be discovered, [and] virgin territories to be explored. Today, however, after the "historic avant-garde" had enjoyed so much success whereby it has been turned into a "chronic conditioning" of the arts, both the destruction rhetoric as much as that of the novelty factor have lost all traces of heroic attraction" (*supra*, p. 100).

What still remains though is the association made between this "stasis" and the "postmodern neo-avant-garde". In support of his thesis, Matei Călinescu quotes Leonard Meyer's subtle remark, according to which this stasis "does not mean the absence of novelty and change – a complete and utter calmness – but, rather, the absence of an orderly sequential change" (*supra*, p. 100). Yet, could the definition of any avant-garde, including here the new, so-called "postmodern" avant-garde do without even this type of change? Why then is there any need for a new avant-garde when all this could be but a plain and simple case of postmodernism?

Tolerance, pluralism, "the increasingly modular structure of our mental Universe", the stasis, alas, all of these do not necessarily plead for the existence and the consistency of a new avant-garde; rather, they plead for a different social and cultural age which, for lack of a better term, we call postmodernism. The term avant-garde used here i.e. in the syntagm "postmodern neo-avant-garde" preserves only its etymological sense, shedding its typological one. The neo-avant-garde, defined as stasis can no longer belong to the avant-garde, but to postmodernism.

I believe that the movements for which Matei Călinescu uses the catch-all *neo-avant-garde* must, in turn, be further dissociated: some of these are indeed neo-avant-garde i.e. re-editions in new contexts and, as such, acquiring new meanings to the avant-garde phenomenon, whereas others are already forms of postmodernism. If we stubbornly insist in marking the innovative character of some of the post-war currents then, instead of using "neo-avant-garde" we ought to rename them – going beyond the slightly risible dissonance of the word itself – as pre-postmodernist(!).

Yet, what good could there be in such a terminological and situational debate in this day and age when "the old and the new, the construction and the destruction, or the beautiful and the repulsive have become, through categorization relativization, almost voided of sense", as the arts blend with the anti-art (Marcel Duchamp) whilst the stasis has become "the major criterion for any significant artistic activity"? (*supra*, p. 100) All of the above are but a consequence of modernity's very own contradictions that have led to an imaginative crisis which the avant-garde further exacerbated.

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The chapter on postmodernism, which Matei Calinescu adds to the 1987 edition of his book, does not constitute a mere add-on, for it clarifies here some of the demarcations made in earlier chapters. And, at the same time, whether explicitly or not, these chapters' revision flows from the author's integrative endeavour in his quest to present postmodernism as one of modernity's aspects, or "faces". "Ten years ago, in the *Faces of Modernity*", he says, "I was considering postmodernism as one of the avant-gardes' subcategories, essentially, as a contemporary avatar of the old avant-garde" (*supra*, p. 186). We can now understand better what the "postmodern neo-avant-garde" means for our author or, otherwise said, we can see that, in actual fact, he was attaching it to the avant-garde rather than to postmodernity; more so, postmodernism itself was conceived as a "contemporary avatar of the old avant-garde". This last section, in particular, has every reason to shock and, not surprisingly, Calinescu abandoned it in the end.

He still maintains the opposition between modernism and avant-garde yet, he considers necessary to revise it in such a way as to "incorporate the recent opposition, much firmer this time, between modernism (including here the avant-garde) and postmodernism" (*supra*, p. 186). Thus, the rapport between modernism and the avant-garde no longer is (in this chapter) one of "exclusion" but one of inclusion.

Pressured by postmodernism – which in the meantime, has taken over not just the literary and artistic critique domain but also, over the social sciences and epistemology, too – Matei Călinescu adopts the American vision of the avant-garde as forming "an integral part of the modernist project" (*supra*, p. 186). Still, if he discusses postmodernism in a book about modernity, he does so because he considers it to be "not a new name given to a new 'reality', or 'mental structure', or 'world perspective', but a perspective which allows certain questions to be asked about modernity in its few embodiments" (*supra*, p. 187). The author's motivation is seducing while being mostly productive yet, why all this reluctance to admit to the possibility that postmodernism is *also* a name given to 'a new reality', 'mental structure' or 'world vision' as it appears from its very analysis?

Matei Călinescu is, however, extremely reluctant to give real substance to the term *postmodernism*. Even against a corpus of illustrative writings, which he himself had put together, he feels obliged to add: "… better said, of writings considered as postmodern" (*supra*, p. 199). Moreover, he considers his very own perspective on postmodernism as being "metaphorical" and based on "family resemblances", "physiognomic" even.

This nominalist type of precaution is in fact present throughout his book, in forms that are more or less explicit. The author's conviction is that the terminological adventure remains independent from the artistic one. There is only one instance where he is seemingly affirming that "the history of the word largely coincides with the history of the phenomenon which it designates" (*supra*, p. 82) – namely, with regard to the avant-garde. The assertion is anguishing since it instantly begs the question: what happens then in the rest of the cases where a parallelism is missing? Can there be a conceptual history possible without a premise, even the presumption, admittedly (it goes without saying, requiring constant discussion and verification) that behind this spate of concepts there still are certain facts pertaining to literary and artistic history? Have we not reached the stage – up to a point, certainly – where realism has become inevitable?

The very type of research undertaken by Matei Călinescu obliges him to prioritise the crystallization of the concepts in question whilst referring to one writer or the other only when the needs of the theoretical or terminological debate require him to do so. Even in the case of fortuitous coincidence posed by the avant-garde, there is little mention of the avant-garde literature *per se*. It is equally surprising and symptomatic too watching the author explaining the avant-garde concept's survival in the '60s, not through the neo-avant-garde's manifestations, but due to the fact that the concept had been "secretly protected from its own internal contradictions…" (*supra*, p. 84).

There is a curios phenomenon going on: not just once, especially during the first part of the book, the terminological avatars are left to their own devices when having to give an account of the literary movement's evolution proper, about which the author has little to say other than in the briefest of passages. The terms (used) have, of course, their very own history, which is different, separated even, from that of the works themselves yet, not independent. On the one hand, there is always a gap left between the manifestations of a particular movement and its artistic achievements: not only because the former usually tend to be maximising (some times even hyperbolical) but also because, sometimes, they happen to be minimising, in other words, they fail to become conscious, they fail to signal certain specific aspects of the works they represent, at least from a theoretical point of view. Failing to follow this ensuing gap closely enough, Matei Călinescu becomes, inadvertently, the victim of certain deductions of a "realist" type.

It is true that a confrontation of the terminological signifiers with the reality on the "ground" at various times (in its "historical" evolution) would have led not only to an extension of the research undertaken but also to a significant change in the structure and overall finality of such a book. The positioning of a particular writer within a certain literary current or another may lead to a search for ever more accurate specifications and never-ending controversies. I do believe though that establishing – for every term considered for discussion – a corpus of "safe" literary works (by that I mean the least likely to arise controversies) would have clarified better the author's own theoretical standpoint whilst avoiding potential confusions or puzzlements. A proper periodization would have added to its exactness i.e. in terms of consistency had this

been the result of the difficult harmonization between concepts and illustrative artistic and cultural facts.

There is no single chapter of the book where the absence of framing a literary corpus is more keenly felt than it is in the introductory one, where modernity and postmodernism appear many times over as synonyms. What strikes us first is the fact that Matei Calinescu gives great width (temporal hence, implicitly semantic) to the term *modernity*. When speaking of Étienne Pasquier's "modernity", for instance, he feels the need to use inverted commas yet, when he speaks of authors which he defends – Ronsard, Du Bellay, Peletier – he does not shirk away from calling them *modern* (without any inverted commas whatsoever). In fact, these authors would fit the modern type yet without them having any modernity to speak of. On the other hand, modernity is stretched right up to the avant-guard, which it implies and prefigures: "Probably, there is not a single feature of the avant-garde, in any of its historical manifestations, which had been implied or even prefigured in modernity's more general sphere. However, there still exist significant differences between the two movements" (*supra*, p. 66).

Undoubtedly, having such a loosely-defined modernity concept allows the author not to treat the apparent differences between various cultural and literary movements, in view of their more or less radical programmes, as absolute. Every one of these movements gains from appearing as a "face of modernity". Modernity itself gains, in terms of its diversity and complexity. Yet, there is someone (or something) that gets lost in this ample encompassing, which is insufficiently differentiated. By extending the term, with particular reference to the past but also with regard to the future, Calinescu leaves undefined (or at least, insufficiently defined) the very core of modernity, its hard core – modernism.

One can talk of a modern era starting in the Renaissance, during the Enlightenment. Romanticism could also be considered as one of the "faces" of this most spacious modernity, yet modernism is that particular movement which only starts during the last quarter of the nineteenth century, via an ever-increasing dissociation from Romanticism. Modernism opposes therefore Romanticism, even if it carries its ideas and its initiatives further, same as it would happen later, when the avant-garde would radicalise (sometimes, to the point of affirming its opposite) the Modernist programme.

Călinescu seems not to sense the dissociation between modernity and modernism as being indispensable, though this would have facilitated, among other things, postmodernism's integration into modernity. What seems important to him is to underline "the indissoluble link between modernism and modernity: "… modernism […] is essentially the search for modernity", he wrote (*supra*, p. 55).

However, it is no less true that our author invokes "an independent notion of modernism", whose sense is preceded and conditioned by the establishment of the distinction between *modern* and *contemporary* (*supra*, p. 60). We are even told that, at the beginning of the twentieth century, "the movement called modernism becomes fully aware of itself" (*supra*, p. 61). We are also told that "the identity between time and self constitutes the foundation of the modernist culture" (*supra*, p. 8).

Yet, at the same time (and occasionally, even on the same page), the confusion between modernity and modernism lingers on. We have seen before that the avant-garde and modernism are considered – on a level playing field – as "two movements" (*supra*, p. 66). Somewhere else (*supra*, p. 64-65), modernity is defined as a "culture of discontinuity" and it is characterised by "rupture and crisis". Are these not features of modernism, rather?

Unlike his American colleagues, Călinescu distinguishes, in a most convincing way, modernism from the avant-garde, though he fails to differentiate clearly modernism within modernity itself. Here is a further example of unexpected equalisation within the frame of a laudable dissociative effort: "It is crystal clear that the avant-garde would have been difficult to be conceived in the absence of a distinct and fully formed conscience of modernity; in any case, admitting to this fact does not justify the confusion between modernity or modernism and the avant-garde, a frequently encountered confusion in the Anglo-American critique, which the current terminological analysis will try to dispel" (*supra*, p. 66).

"Modernity *or* modernism", that is the question. Our critic does not seem prepared to give modernism a literary reality, though he makes detailed forays into the historical timeline of the term's acceptations. He refers more than once to some of the pivotal modernist authors, such as Proust, Thomas Mann or T.S. Eliot yet, fails to establish that much needed corpus of modernist oeuvres. We all know how particular oeuvres are resistant to being pigeon-holed to any given conceptual pattern, and we also know how this pattern is, in turn, lacking in unity and homogeneity. The risks inherent in such an undertaking are nevertheless inevitable in the sense that they have to be assumed.

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These questions and/or objections serve no purpose other than verifying the flexibility and toughness of an imposing theoretical construct, admirable in so many ways. First and foremost, Matei Călinescu's fair measuring of accents and balanced judgements are indeed admirable. His preferences do not lead him to overbidding whilst his problematizing vocation does not obscure poor value judgements. (His stylistic considerations vis-à-vis the *kitsch* phenomenon constitutes particular exemplars for the safety of his value judgements.) The author knows how to put an end to his classifying endeavour the moment the crowding of details, variables and nuances risks pulverising the concept itself. He always knows how to make chronology meaningful, how to make sense of the evolution by evidencing essential connexions that are so often hard to trace.

Though his book is dedicated to notions entering the semantic areas of modernity, Matei Călinescu does not shirk away from highlighting the abuses made vis-à-vis tradition. Those accusing the modern civilization are not necessarily (and automatically) taxed as reactionary retrogrades. Even extremist movements – regardless of how promising they appear to be in theoretical terms or how provoking they may be in terms of their foreseeable social effects – are considered carefully, benevolently yet, critically too. The author does not get carried away by any fashionable tendency, be this ideological or artistic and, amongst other considerations

too, one symptomatic detail about him is that he does not consider dated certain critical works, published in the '60s.

Whereas he remains conscious of contemporary humanism's limits, Călinescu does not trifle with the various forms of anarchism and counterculture that so many of his fellow American intellectuals are seemingly inclined towards. The Marxist and the *Marxified* exegete clichés are met with short, polemical bursts, whereas socialist realism provokes, retrospectively, (a lethal dose of) poised sarcasm. Such sequences, however, remain atypical instances for his overall intellectual conduct, which is neither Manichaeist nor is it impassioned. The critic does not absolutise the aesthetic value and does not consider elitism to be a merit in itself; whilst failing to "demonise" the market, he does not consider it to be an exclusive criterion, either. He also makes a net distinction between being a public success and the value of intellectual credibility (*supra*, p. 178). The dialogical, Bakhtian polyphony disseminated by him verifies once more his constitutive Olympianism.

Without ignoring certain ideological and methodological thresholds, Matei Călinescu positions himself firmly within a *qualitative* meditating and writing frame, conceived in such a way so as to transcend the act of translation. He remains a thinker that is able to clarify whilst transfiguring his thematic by applying spiritual lucidity to a rigorous observation of the subject at hand, enriching, surpassing and extending its scope through a number of observations made *en passant*, remarkable by their resounding fairness and extreme subtlety.

*Five Faces of Modernity* is more than a mere conceptual history endeavour, it is a synthesis of culture, from which none of modernity's major problematics are missing. Whilst considering his field of expertise more from a European rather than an American perspective and adopting in the analysis of certain American phenomena a European point of view even, Matei Călinescu offers us a meditation on the historical sources of modernity that starkly brings them into relief, on modernity's landed aporias and its chances of survival in an intoxicated world of the future.

The conceptual landmarks chosen by Călinescu allow him to build a coherent World view out of (puzzling) sections. The epoch which we are currently traversing is offered a reflection in which it can consider itself. Moreover, he is exploring not just the attested terminological configurations but also, their creative theoretical potential. It is this very last quality that brings into relief its book amongst many other successful endeavours of memorable syntheses of modernity and postmodernity. All of this and even more make me confident in my final conclusion about this book being an epochal synthesis. I would wish this appreciation to be understood – not merely as homage to the author's constant preoccupation for literality – *littéralement et dans tous les sens*.

## NOTES

1 *Aspecte literare*, Bucharest, 1965, p. 333.

2 Meyer, James and Ross, Toni, *Aesthetic/Anti-Aesthetic: An Introduction*, Art Journal, Vol. 63, No. 2, pp. 20-23, Published by: College Art Association (summer, 2004).

# The Figure in the Carpet

MONICA SPIRIDON

I could say that I had a special friendship with Matei Călinescu. This friendship was based on a blend of congeniality and recognition of common cultural affinities, seasoned with enough incompatibilities to harness a spirited debate that also had a ludic fibre to it.

To give one single example, we were both fascinated by imagining an age during which we would have liked to have lived, if we had a choice. Our wishful choices were converging towards the end of the nineteenth century, when we could have benefited from a certain tranquillity pleasantly combined with the comforts brought on by civilization; we would have travelled short distances by coach and long ones by the Orient Express.

Things were different when the rules of the game were imposing that a choice had to be made about the cultural age during which we would prefer to have lived. Matei was declaring that he would have chosen the avant-garde, though I still believe the baroque would have suited him better. I, for one, would have preferred without a shadow of a doubt the Renaissance yet, he was insisting that classicism would have fitted me like a glove.

Anyway, the imaginary screen play where I frequently meet Matei is one where we're chatting against a background of prolonged *flâneries* through various urban spaces (Bucharest, Paris, Munich or Bloomington) from the scenery of which there is seldom missing the café-bar.

In the following reverential regards, I will try to capture not so much the profile of the man which was Matei Călinescu, but rather the tropism inherent in his writing.

I believe that there can be distinguished at least two unifying criteria between Matei Călinescu's books on critique and those on literary theory, otherwise heterogeneous, that have been published in two different languages and cultures: on the one hand, his vocation as an intellectual discourse analyst (in all of its aspects, be they ideological, rhetorical, moral, thematic or formal) whilst one the other, his propensity towards categorising in the synthesis sphere (which is, mostly, a nominalist type of propensity).

We could eventually consider the extent to which these convergent propensities support one another.

His debut volume – *Titan and Genius in Eminescu's poetry*: the significance and directions of Eminescu's ethos (*Titanul și geniul în poezia lui Eminescu*, Bucharest, 1964) – suggests that a creative typology had to be established, apparently following in the footsteps of those authors' previous studies about Eminescu (in particular, D. Popovici, as has already been mentioned before). Still, it is easily apparent how his investigative ethos differs markedly from that of his predecessors. In the simplest terms available, Matei Călinescu signals the existence of a Bifrons (demonic) Eminescu, whose Janus effigy would later be legitimised by

Ion Negoițescu, in a fundamental book. More recently, one of D. Popovici's descendants, Matei Călinescu, appears himself as a precursor of Ion Negoițescu. Why so? Because, by comparing him to the former, he interprets Eminescu from a *visibly positioned* standpoint, same as the latter does: from a particular type of aesthetics perspective, which emphatically relies on the modernist experience.

From here onwards follows another differentiation in Matei Călinescu's book by comparison to the preceding *Eminescologists*: the interest shown in placing a creative physiognomy – individualistic or as a group – in ample epistemic frames. Regardless of their immediate object, the interpretations offered are constantly quartered within the perspective offered by the symptomatic relationship between an intellectual (Eminescu) and the Time of his era. In the conceptualising perspective offered in the book, *Eminescianism* becomes an ample sensibility category that prefigures a series of cultural options becoming available in the twentieth century.

As it is reread now, with the benefit of the hindsight offered by his latter works, Matei Călinescu's debut book attests the keen and rather precocious interest of the author for the intellectual rhetoric of the past two centuries.

From the same alleged perspectivist angle, European Classicism is approached in a monograph volume. The book's problem-specific design closely follows the avenues opened up by the history of ideas, in the following centuries. (A single example of this occurrence is the career made by the neo-baroque in our century.) Taking advantage of the opportunity thus created, the author reveals, with much practical spirit, the convergence and the stability of the hypotheses advanced on classicism, dispersed and sometimes diffusely permeating most of his syntheses. What I mean by that is that in his book on Eminescu, or in his other book on modern poetry as well as in his latter book theorising on the ages and faces of modernity, classicism is ritually invoked as an *ab quo* element. And this is because Matei Călinescu's fixed vantage point always allows an optimal perception of the *creative differentiation and its labile norms*.

As a confirmation of the above, Matei Călinescu's doctoral thesis demonstrates how the modern poetry logic radically contradicts primarily the classical axioms of poetic language: its imitative function and its sheer instrumental value. Starting from this point, poetry surpasses yet another landmark, namely romanticism – preponderantly relying on the expression of emotiveness and creative imagination – to reach, progressively, the current use hypothesis on poetics, as a particular form of handling language in the manufacturing of the sense.

Of the volumes preceding the exile, these two most evidently betray the speculative continuity with particular versions of modernity's grand syntheses, that were to be later published across the Atlantic: *Faces of Modernity: Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch* (Indiana University Press, 1977) and, respectively *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (Duke University Press, 1987, the revised edition, where a new chapter *On Postmodernism* is added, and is subsequently translated into Japanese, Spanish and the Romanian language – published at Univers Printing Press, in 1995). A series of studies and "satellite" essays, published in various magazines or in collective volumes enter, before and after publication, in its gravitational sphere. I believe that special mentioning has

to be made to the *Modern, Modernism, Modernization* chapter, which was published in the volume edited by Walter de Gruyter, *The Turn of the Century* (University of Antwerp, 1992). Apart from this, for over a decade, Matei Călinescu had been one of the animators of the tempestuous international debates on postmodernism and/or co-editor of several critical anthologies dedicated to this matter.

It must be said that in its final version, which included all five faces, the book achieves the record of putting a "house" – inside which a Babylonian chaos seems to be prevailing at this point in time, one where everyone can express themselves as they see fit – in order.

Matei Călinescu's American synthesis on modernity offers maximum return on the investment made through the two defining tendencies of his production as an anatomist and historian of cultural forms: the propensity towards nominalism and, alongside it, a type of perspectivism open to contextual pressures – ideological, writ large – as has been exerted upon the artistic creation at various times in history.

The book is an indispensable guide allowing one to find their way through modernity's topography, signalling the errors and the projective illusions fuelled by its acceptations and definitions, for over a century. It is the product of a modern intellectual, committed to prospecting modernity and, in parallel to that, someone committed to verifying his own tools. One must at least mention that self-reflexivity constantly shadowed Matei Călinescu's oeuvres, his poetry writing and prose as a cultural radiography.

Upon the concept of modernity Matei Călinescu operates a triple semantic projection. Firstly, an axiological angle involving an added value or not. (Modernism arose as a pejorative concept, for instance.) Secondly, there is a historical angle, postulating the term's acceptation as covering a certain segment in the cultural time. (Modernity starts around the conventional year 1950; afterwards, the *new* acquires an offensive character.) Finally, there is a strictly typological angle, with a propensity on the qualitative aspect of this instrument for systematising such a category. (It is admissible, for instance, to speak about the modernity exhibited by an author from the middle ages.)

In the book itself, modernity is defined as a relationship concept, committed to operating amongst multiple oppositional tensions. On the one hand, it is opposing tradition and/or its forerunners, generically speaking. Afterwards, it opposes the bourgeois modernity, which believed in utility, rationality and progress. (As the author distinguishes between the two types of modernity, which are in permanent conflict. One of these is aesthetically-cultural whilst the other pertains to the social realm of civilization. The first rhythmically appoints itself as a response to the other – generated by technological progress, the industrial revolution and the mass-media, giving birth, in the process, to the mass-culture phenomenon).

At last, modernity opposes itself, as it threatens to turn itself into a source of authoritarianism and even a hypostasis, seen here as an underlying reality of tradition.

Every one of the five faces of modernity identified in the book are the result of an intricate play of forces, including complementarities and contrasts, all of whom are projected onto the background of this triple tension mentioned before.

Another fact worthy of attention concerns Matei Călinescu's acceptance of the literary terminology's parallel regime against that of (artistic) creation, without suffering from the nominalist legitimacy-lacking complex.

It is illustrative in this respect the remarkable study made by published in the volume Exploring Postmodernism (co-edited by himself and by D.W. Fokkema). He warns against the danger of turning our working concepts into ideal essences, or resolutely probing their "reality" or, in other words, their inclusion amongst other historical accessories.

The *Rereading* volume (Yale University Press, 1993) – which I have to admit to it being the book I like best out of Matei Calinescu's entire oeuvre – articulates most explicitly, into a theoretical project, a series of diffuse obsessions, which are present in his earlier writings. In time, rereading has been turned into a theoretical arch-thematic, involved in the literature production, consumption and evolution. In fact, this volume has had a sequel in the making, under the working title: Rereading Poetry.

The regressive perspective adopted in studies of cultural morphology – whereby Matei Călinescu's observational vantage point is placed within his own time, much as the landmarks of his aesthetics are – automatically involve a migration from the present towards the past, meaning an act of rereading.

Let us not forget that in the author's memoirs, the act of rereading is invested with an essential dignity. Equivalent to a retroactive recuperation of the lost sense, rereading becomes the instrument for resisting the mystification of history. In the terms in which it is being defined, in the Preface of the volume's third edition, post-censorship becomes, in turn, a perverse variant of rereading, betraying the equation writer/power which is specific in relation to a certain point in time.

Therefore, it is not at all surprising that in most of the aspects revealed in Matei Călinescu's books, literature is read, reread and is even from its end towards its beginning and not the other way round. As a monographic object of study, rereading is an instrumental concept, a speculative visor and maybe even an epistemological metaphor.

The book suggests a coherent theory of rereading, starting at a crossroads where poetics, philosophy, ethics, psychology, the theory of mentalities and even politics meet. Rereading is understood as a moment in the great chain of repetition where reading, writing, rereading and rewriting become simple names which are accidentally different yet belonging to the same creative gesture.

Practically, what is currently termed *reading* is but a Utopian ground zero: upon measuring against it, everything else is rereading. Matei Călinescu makes a methodical inventory of the specific dimensions and the essential strategies of rereading. Viewed from a normative, therefore canonical, perspective, the hypothetical polarity reading-rereading allows the author to peek through its visor to watch the chicanes and the various ages of the Western mentality. It opens up towards the historical horizons of the perpetual confrontation between New and Old in Creation, following closely the manner in which the rapport reading-rereading had been formulated, at key points in the modern cultural conscience and, particularly, what other values, outside literature, had been frequently associated to it.

If we admit the internal coherence hypothesis, whereby there are no spectacular advances or ruptures in Matei Călinescu's writing then, it worth mentioning the project which was started at the Woodrow Wilson Center, in 1994-1995, *The Intellectuals and Nationalism in Eastern Europe: The Case of Romania (1930-1993)* a project that still remains operational. Its initiator quarters in this main area of interest: perspectival rereading of the discourse belonging to successive cultural ages, the clarification of conceptual and valuing milestones, the role played by intellectuals, in particular, the role of these creators within contemporary mentalities' dynamic etc. Thus, the book on Eugène Ionescu is but a piece which has been separated from this mosaic.

Through everything he wrote, at home or abroad, and regardless of the diversity of genus, thematic, methodology or language, Matei Călinescu enlightens the tension between the Multiple and the One in culture, by turning it into a constant subject of meditation.

Maybe this way will become clearer why I continue to believe to this day that the best cultural age for this intellectual that passed away would have been the baroque.

# Matei Călinescu or the ethics of „deference success"

ALEXANDRU MATEI

> *Critique cannot legitimately aspire to anything beyond a deference-type of success and, for that reason alone, it has to meditate primarily to the kind of language it uses: not so much in terms of its accessibility or inaccessibility, but more in terms of its internal or external validity.*
>
> Matei Călinescu

For a while now, I have become definitively convinced: Romanian culture is allergic to theory and it has every reason to be that way. History is most unpredictable here hence, Romania's history of philosophy can merely tell us that one day it's fine, the next it's black. Nothing is ever that clear cut, not even the black depths of hell, if only! Romanian literature has little time for linguistic innovations starting *from*, *within* and *for* its Romanian language host. Therefore, one wonders, what good is there in having literary theory?

Romanian political philosophy is, one the one hand, largely reduced to a moral discourse about religious beliefs whilst on the other, it passes various *judgements* for which the sole evaluating criterion rests with personal experience i.e. if I had a bad time then, it was generally bad or, if I had a good time this means it was plain sailing for everyone else. The truth is we get by. We do not collapse yet, we are not top of the pile either. If we cannot invent anything worthy of the name, at least we can get to know each other better and forget about worrying by using intense social networking. At least here, on our own turf, we can be admired or cursed or, we can be heroes or victims, because this is our own world which no stranger to its confines knows any better – so, we can pretend this world is but the Universe itself.

Considering language in terms of its internal or external validity cannot constitute a worthy rallying call made by a Romanian critic to its peers. Being preoccupied with the coherence of your own discourse alongside the foreseeable consequences of it being uttered beyond the page it was written on seems to be but a Wittgensteinian-type of critical pursuit – as it actually is, in its final analysis. The Romanian critic who formulated this pursuit could not have remained forever just a Romanian critic. And nor did he stay that way.

Today, I read for the first time excerpts from *Fragmentarium* – the tenth title in Matei Călinescu's bibliography. He was 39. This was the year he left Romania for the USA. I read there articles published between 1968 and 1973, where he reflects on other literary criticism, philosophy and European literature books. Matei Călinescu writes as every other European intellectual does. He quotes in French and translates quotes from other foreign books. He gives thoughtful consideration to everything he writes – the first of these texts is also the longest

and it is about irony as a condition for the morality of writing: a rubricator of these "fragments". Now watch him rise to the surface: "the problem with literary anonymity is mostly a moral problem and only afterwards it becomes an aesthetical pursuit" (the decision or the consequences of anonymity always have a moral explanation to them); "the interpretive effort incorporates an inalienable moral value" (interpreting results in making semantic decisions with varying buoyancy values; as long as these always imply an *other*, they attain a moral value); "irony – the supreme hubris and the supreme humility also"; "for Levi-Strauss, ethnography is, of course, a science yet, beyond that, it is the expression of a moral attitude […]"

Now: reading Matei Călinescu here, in *Fragmentarium*, I cannot possibly see how he could have continued publishing in Romania for much longer, without making compromises. Who wouldn't get angry listening to Matei Călinescu speaking about the morality involved in the act of writing, about the sanitising role played by critique and philosophy, and the ultimate exigency of "anonymity" as fulfilled by great writers? This is 1973, and the literary circle "Flacara" (the Torch) is about to come into being; a year later, Ceausescu becomes president whilst holding on to a sceptre; in 1978, unable to keep quiet, Noica publishes "The Romanian Sentiment of Being". Once more, I offer a quote from Matei Călinescu: "Ironical silence may occur in many situations that refuse to be pigeon-holed". In the '70s, the word family bonding around the noun "Romanian" was getting pinned into an insect collection box; the syntagm, in which the ideological sentencing pin was inserted, during the last decade of communism, was the well-known: the Party – Ceausescu – Romania. The chance of being a Romanian intellectual was but a Fata Morgana-type of mirage, here in Romania. Matei Călinescu is neither the first nor is he the last intellectual whose destiny proves that a Romanian intellectual cannot remain an intellectual *per se* other than by going into exile. Before 1989, in Romania, there was a manifest impossibility to follow, without derogation, Matei Călinescu's prescription: meditating on language as the foundation of the critical act. The moment a Romanian writer chose to pursue a career – thus becoming institutionalised in the process – he was obliged to make amends to the standard of exigency of such morality. Nowadays, acting as a public figure on the Romanian intellectuals' stage involves different types of compromises and alienation.

As happened before with Eliade, it may well be that Matei Călinescu resisted as a Romanian intellectual, by preserving his status as a Romanian language writer. It may well be that Romanian culture is like a mother that has to be left behind before one gets affected by the mummy's child syndrome. In 1996, walking the Cismigiu park's alleys, I read Matei Călinescu's *The Life and Opinions of Zacharias Lichter* (*Viața și opiniile lui Zacharias Lichter*) in its new edition published by Polirom. Previously published in two editions, one in 1969 and the second, in 1971, this book reminds me of Robert Musil's *The Man without Qualities*. Placing this *man without qualities* on a pedestal, at the height of communist fervour, smacks me as a subtle form of anti-systemic resistance, rather belonging to the (epistemological awakening) avoidance techniques later suggested by Michel de Certeau. This form of moral resistance prefers the avoidance of affirming suicidal assertions or compromises. This text avoided censorship simply because the censors found it harder then to attribute a political significance to this type of avoidance: "Zacharias Lichter is not only a social character but is

also one that openly cultivates a certain type of sociopathic behaviour as an expression of moral revolt and a means to his salvation: he is cynical (in the etymological and Diogenian sense), desperate and mystical at the same time, a mystic who turns his cynical negations into paradoxical means of purification" (my quote is from the author's preface in the 1995 edition). Zacharias Lichter is a character seldom found in the Romanian literature – as hard as it is to find critics of Matei Călinescu's stature amongst his Romanian peers. In light of such preoccupations and techniques of viewing the act of writing as a form of asceticism, I can see Livius Ciocarlie as being a critic who lives up to these exacting expectations.

Zacharias Lichter was not fond of the sea – I know how taken aback I was back then. I was about to head for the sea, to read Matei Călinescu's *Five Faces of Modernity*. In this book, we find Călinescu in the guise of an American academic, intelligent yet modest, disciplined and moderately eloquent. Modest, as I was saying before hence, for this particular reason, unremarkable. I cannot say that I prefer Matei Călinescu, the theoretician to Matei Călinescu, the writer. Alongside Toma Pavel and Virgil Nemoianu, he belongs to those brilliant Romanian literati that offered themselves the chance to become world figures in literary theory. The eldest of the three is the one who departed us first.

Matei Călinescu departed this world at the dawn of a new era in Western critical thinking. We see now the arrival of a global intellectual who can write and publish in both English and Romanian languages, for example, irrespective of what corner of the globe he/she finds itself in. It is an era where one is no longer forced to leave their country so they can write in their mother tongue and become intellectually alienated in the process. To be able to think (critically) nowadays in Romania, one has to resist to be institutionalised. He/she has to be contented with this type of "deference success". And this is what seems to be the most difficult thing to achieve.

I also read excerpts from *M's Portray*. I can now say that this man, Matei Călinescu, was forced to live according to the moral principles of antiquity – which he theorised despite the fact that he may not have been that keen to practise them too. Being forced to handle the death of the life he had given. Zacharias Lichter too had been forced to assume the experience of his ill son's death. The former dandy was forced to turn into a father stricken by the loss of his child. It was at this point that Matei Călinescu came to practice moral writing in the most direct way imaginable, without having to resort to any theoretical or fictional underpinnings. For me, this book becomes today a self-administered admonition.

Matei Călinescu – the person that I never met – shadowed while illuminating the intellectual residing in Matei Călinescu, enough to turn him into an aesthetical as well as theorising yet, discrete human being. His literary work reminds me of the shattering silence in Musil's lonesome reflexivity yet it also has some of that transposed onto his son, M. His theoretical writing is eloquent and has a discreet limpidity about it, disciplined and consistent yet, devoid of stupendous artifices. The two styles employed remain distinct and maybe this is the true lesson to be learned from him: "Being so hard to remain nameless, it would be ideal to carry your name as if this were an accident whose consequences have to be assumed and never forgotten." It couldn't have been easy being Matei Călinescu.

# Matei Călinescu. Notes on a posthumous autobiographical project

RALUCA DUNĂ

In an interview with "The Sunday Newspaper" (*Ziarul de duminica*), dating from the 25th of May and the 1st of June 2004 respectively, Matei Călinescuwas asked *en passant* about the heterogeneity of his work, which includes poetry volumes, prose, critique, journal, memoirs and literary criticism. More precisely, he was asked whether a guiding light or even a pattern in the intricate tapestry underpinning the grand puzzle of his books could be found. The answer Matei Călinescu gave back then deserves to be read *in extenso*:

"I have always been obsessed by the vividness of my memories, even as an adolescent, hence my project, which had yet to gain consistency by that stage was autobiographical and thus, willy-nilly, I started piecing together various fragments, belonging to different genres, into a semblance of autobiography which I have yet to finalise as there are still several pieces missing from this puzzle. *Zacharias Lichter* is essentially an autobiographical work despite the fact that its main character uses a real-life model, which I have already explained. It is a personal portray yet, strangely enough, it bears no relation to my other writings dating from that period, which were either circumstantial or scholastic. I wish to draw attention to the fact that out of my past writings, *The Life and Opinions of Zacharias Lichter* (*Viața și opiniile lui Zacharias Lichter*) is the only thing worth remembering […] this was a book that I did not believe in for a very long time… I disowned it for many years only to rediscover it after '89, when I wrote, between '92-'93, *Memories in Dialogue* (*Amintiri în dialog*), as a series of lengthy letters with Ion Vianu where I'm discussing this at greater length..."

Interestingly enough, during this 2004 interview, out of the many writings pre-dating his exile, Călinescu retains just one piece of work, which he had previously reneged on – namely, this lyrical essay-novel, *Zacharias Lichter* that appears to be recognised now as an autobiographical piece of writing, despite it being, in equal measure, the "portray" of a real-life model. One wonders why is it that the author reclaims only this particular work out of the many writings created during his initial stay in Romania. My hypothetical answer to that is the following: all this has to do with him returning, for the last years of his life, to his initial project, namely, this Proustian autobiographical Project – whereby its autobiographic nature rests with this phantasmal recovery of his personal memory.

Matei Călinescu rekindled his interest in this autobiographical Project only after 1989. This fact owed to "the possibility of returning to Romania" and, more to the point, it owed to the distinct possibility of "reintegrating himself into the Romanian language". His *physical* and *metaphysical* return to his mother tongue and its rather intimate cultural space, allowing exiled persons to recover their lost identity is what makes him return to poetry, via the 2004 book, *You: Elegies and Inventions* (*Tu: Elegii și invenții*), some thirty-odd years later. This same

"return" must also be linked to his introduction of "a novel Romanian chapter on Mateiu I. Caragiale", in the Romanian version of *Rereading*, something that I will return to a little later.

According to the author's own admissions, made during that interview, apart from the chapter dedicated to *The Beaux, Rereading* (*Crailor, A citi, a reciti*), overall, this is "one very personal, very autobiographical book", not surprisingly dedicated to his son, Matthew. The subject of reading is seen in this essentially academic book mainly "from a psychological standpoint and from the point of view of my own biography as a reader" hence the reason for the existence of an underlying autobiographical plan supporting and reinforcing this entire theoretical endeavour. It is for this particular reason that the "hidden treasure" reading model is so important in this book, a psychological model pertaining not just to the passions for secrets and games harnessing the child or the adolescent reader's psychology, but also to the "recovery" of those "treasures" hidden inside the "interior castles" of the self, as Saint Augustin would have it.

Matei Călinescu admits, during that same interview, being influenced in choosing this framework for seeking the secret through rereading by Mircea Eliade's post-war stories, where he perceived a latent secret asking to be deciphered. Moreover, an entire book was later dedicated to this quest for the secret: *About Mircea Eliade and Petru Culianu* (*Despre Mircea Eliade și Ioan Petru Culianu*) a book which the author says it also "derives from an autobiographical project, representing a kind of parable, which should be read as such"…

I will not decipher here these books' secrets and parables; I will only collect some of the shards scattered around this puzzle demonstrating there is a certain structure about it. Even if superficially considered, Matei Călinescu's oeuvre, published after 1990, becomes increasingly autobiographical: *Memories in Dialogue*, *M's Portray* (*Portretul lui M*), *A Different Kind of Journal* (*Un alt fel de jurnal*) or, the poetry volume, *You*. The rest of his books, whether dealing with Ionesco's identity and existential themes, with (re)reading (*To Read and Re-read*) or the book about Eliade and Culianu are no less autobiographical, yet they remain at "project" level. These books answer personal questions or follow the winding trajectory of inner quests and experiences. In any case, the "autobiographical" nature must not be seen as life-story material, as an external biography; it should rather be seen as a *story* or parable for one's inner-life, a musical, Proustian-memory "cathedral".

I will pause to reflect on the most important book, published after 1990, *To Read and Reread*: *The poetics of rereading*. I will analyse "the novel Romanian chapter" briefly, which is centred on two consubstantial themes: rereading Mateiu Caragiale-style within "the circular time of memory" and shifting the accent from rereading towards rereading the self. These suggestions appear in the Preface to the Romanian edition, where we are told of the book's "hidden, autobiographical"[1] sense and they are further reinforced in the *Addendum*, the chapter on Mateiu Caragiale, written in Romanian, in 2002, a chapter that can be seen to be an "introduction"[2] rather than an epilogue. This is because, the author adds, "true introductions are always written *after*; they are the equivalent of rereading one's inner self"[3]. Another "parenthesis": generically, the act of literary reading presupposes a certain type of "introspection or reading of the self"[4], whether this is done consciously or not.

The act of reading and, even more so, the act of rereading is an operation which takes place within one's inner time, inside the reader's memory, occurring when tracing those memories, bookish albeit emotional, imprinted by books to the most profound levels of one's identity. Thus, true reading implacably leads to a reading of one's self or, better said, to an ongoing rereading of the self via the books one reads. Consequently, even the theory of rereading itself may therefore become a form of introspection and autobiography.

Moving now to the actual text of this Romanian chapter, I will pause to consider a revealing fragment from *Memories about the Book of the Beaux* (*Amintiri despre cartea Crailor*), the first subchapter of the *Addendum*:

"I like to believe that true Mateiu Caragiale-type of readers may still be found. For such people, the type of (re)reading required by *Memories about the Book of the Beaux* bears, aesthetically speaking, something of the "piousness" required by the periodical return to a sacred or, at least, quasi-religious text: the type of reverence manifesting itself through the inner recital of the text, a liturgical re-verbalization, amongst other things. Pious reading, be it religious or secularly modern has an obvious social dimension attached to it: it cannot flourish outside a limited circle, […] within an association of (fanatical) followers, within a certain group whose members know and recognise each other according to a set of protocols, rituals and codes, with "passwords" that remain indiscernible to the oblivious eye. […]

It was fall, around late October, possibly even November, "a time for tears", at the end of high school and we knew all too well this was a forbidden book, circulating underground. In my group of friends, a lot of music-listening was going on, vast amounts of reading was done, samizdat poetry was written […] and adolescent-style drinking bouts followed by never-ending discussions and "confessions" […]. In a way, *the Beaux* – a book where a lot of drinking takes place all the time […] – awarded an imaginary peerage to our otherwise modest, "au tapis franc" reunions, giving them an air of aristocratic decadence, extending into the literary space […]."[5]

This fragment has clear autobiographical implications attached to it yet, also intra-textual: "the piousness of reading" superimposes itself on the existential piousness towards the forbidden texts that were elevating the adolescent drinking sessions from before. The small group of insiders, of Mateiu Caragiale-type readers, in whose existence the author still wants to believe, melts with the group of friends from the "real author's" youth. The current essay about *The Beaux*, which was edited in October-November of 2002, starts both symbolically and as an autobiographical project in that "late October, possibly even November" of his adolescent youth. The comments made by these Beaux are echoing, both as an epiphany and a ritual too, the mythical beginnings of the Beaux that also took place around the months of October and November of 1910 (maybe even on the 16th of November, which coincides with Saint Matthew's Day).

Let us now add the content of note 20, made in the *Addendum* chapter:

> "I've spent a pleasant October morning, in 2002, browsing with devotional care through the pages of item no. 16, at the Lilly Library, the University of Indiana's rare books and manuscripts section."[6]

On the one hand, a note such as this one would be far better suited to a journal rather than a Reading Theory book. On the other hand, item 16 sends us to the numerological comments made on the Mateiu Caragiale's text and to the cabalistic speculations made about Borges' texts. Note 15, from the first chapter, refers to the date of 16th of June 1904, during which time Joyce's Ulysses is supposed to take place, a date which also coincides with the only possible explanation for choosing this particular date, its autobiographical connotation![7] (In passing, one might add that Matei Călinescu was born on the 15th of June, hence this play on the numbers 15 and 16 also has, in this context, an autobiographical connotation attached to it).

This autobiographical correspondence leads us to re-(read) the beginning and the end of the *Addendum*, where Mateiu Caragiale's novel is compared with (Joyce's) *Ulysses* – a book which, allegedly, cannot be read, as it can only be reread. This paradox is verifiable not just in the case of *The Beaux of the Old Court* (*Crailor de Curtea-Veche*) or Borges' *El Aleph*, the two books which initiate and conclude, respectively, Matei Călinescu's book about rereading but it also becomes, to my mind, the anamnesis principle underpinning his book. Through his informal "Romanian chapter" about the beaux, Matei Călinescu chooses "a tiny Aleph in the Balkans" to reflect himself in, same as it happens with the first person narrator in *El Aleph* (which is "Borges" himself) reflecting in the Aleph hidden in that Buenos Aires cellar.

I would venture a different interpretation to the question "what book would you take with you to a deserted island"? What else can this book, that we would take with us onto a deserted island, be other than the "island's hidden treasure" itself, the Aleph which "diminutively reflects the entire world" while reflecting us too? *To read* and *reread* represents, upon introducing this Romanian chapter, a type of translation and/or rereading of the self from the academic, exoteric position of the author into an esoteric, Mateiu Caragiale-type, Romanian one. And the key to this autobiographical (self-) conversion rests with the chapter on Mateiu Caragiale. Throughout this entire book is woven a subtle network of correspondences and intra-/inter-textual hints between the author of the "sacred" text, Mateiu Caragiale, and the author Matei Călinescu(the namesake coincidence is not haphazard either in this equation), between the primary text and its comment, namely, the current rereading act, and between the time of the first reading as an adolescent and its current, conceptualising rerun. It is self-evident therefore how the type of reading which we, the readers, are asked to employ must implicitly be similar.

*To Read and Re-read* addresses a (re-) reader as it creates an ideal type of what such a (re-) reader should be like. Matei Călinescu even mentions at some point, in the *Addendum*, an ideal "angelic memory", pertaining to details, or the "concurrently linear and circular time" of the act of reading (in *Epilogue*), to "memory's mythical time" or to the "model of *a time* which is metaphorically circular"[8]. The conclusion to the first part reveals the great challenge of (re)reading: "the possibility to imagine and explore through reading a mythical, circular time"[9]. Whether this *time* has connotations implying an exit from the (physical) time of this world, as happens in Eliade's novels, or whether it wishes to signify a descent into St. Augustin's "memoria sui", an (integration into an) internal, non-temporal time, (re)reading presupposes an act of "reading and discovering the self"[10].

In the Epilogue, the entire poetics of (re)reading is sublimated with an invitation made to such Mateiu Caragiale-type of readers, such as these have been "postulated here", to "meditate" on "the act of rereading and its epiphanies".[11] The autobiographic Project, seen as the act of writing an internal biography and of rereading one's self, also presupposes a manifest or latent desire to attain, through such autobiographical writing, an epiphany. An epiphany that may convince in turn a re-reader to start seeking an epiphany… of the Mateiu Caragiale-type.

## NOTES

1 Matei Călinescu, *A citi, a reciti*, Ed. Polirom, Iași, 2003, p. 13
2 Matei Călinescu, *op.cit*., p. 13.
3 *Ibidem*.
4 *Ibid*., pp.13-14.
5 *Ibid*., pp. 298-299.
6 *Ibid*., p. 380.
7 *Ibid*., pp357-358.
8 *Ibid*., p. 50.
9 *Ibid*., p. 68.
10 *Ibid*., p. 277.
11 *Ibid*., p. 294.

# Experiencing Vacuity

IRINA GEORGESCU

In this article, I will consider Matei Călinescu's book about Eugen Ionescu, *Teme identitare și existențiale* [*Eugène Ionesco: identity and existential themes*], published in Iași, in 2006, at Junimea. To begin with, I wish to draw attention to the fact that Matei Călinescu's study considers not only Ionescu's works as they were published in French, but also his identity shift from Eugen Ionescu to Eugène Ionesco, his works written in Romanian and the way Ionescu's relationship with Romania evolves over time. Current studies about Ionescu's plays offer but a straightforward linguistic x-ray, which limit the possibilities of textual interpretation by expressing the experience of absurdity as the sole solution to penetrating a static Universe, voided of significance. What seems to have been left unexplored though is the way in which Matei Călinescu's discourse is articulated by it being constantly referenced to Ionescu's experience, to his published journals, to the evolution of his plays and also to the way in which, over time, these plays came to be received by the public thus establishing a strong bond between the Romanian and the French period of his work. This impasse is nonetheless negotiated with a great deal of courage and analytical finesse through the extended version of the book: *Ionesco: Recherches identitaires* (published, in the French translation made by Simona Modreanu, in Paris, at Oxus, 2005). Thus, Matei Călinescu offers the choice of an in-depth, biographical analysis of Ionescu's works, from the particular perspective of symbolic criticism, which preserves its vitality at interpretive level. Excerpts from the Romanian text were published, between 2004 and 2005, in various literary magazines: *Cuvântul*, *22*, *Lettre internationale* (in the Romanian version), *Vatra*, *Echinox*, *Apostrof*. Matei Călinescu's study took into consideration Eugène Ionesco's complete works as a French playwright, "going beyond the identity perspective, in particular, from which this book destined to become part of the series *Les Roumains de Paris* was conceived".

The assumed research areas consider, on the one hand, "the issues surrounding the identity of this Romanian and French writer […], crucial in terms of understanding his entire literary career and spiritual biography" (p. *8*) and the way this study is received "by virtue of the Borges effect, for the polemical energy of the text, for its interrogative intelligence, [and] for the good quality intellectual spectacle it offers". On the other hand, the extended chapters on analysing the plays aim to identify and define the distinct procedures which underpin Ionescu's plays, "a type of play act where contradiction (self-contradiction) has an essential role" in revealing the meaning of theatre plays. Matei Călinescu does not hesitate to wire up Ionescu's contradictions to the "French writer's half-Romanian identity", associated and often confused with his father, a figure which he tries to exorcise with no success. He only manages to turn it into "a personal myth, apparently dark and negative yet, in fact, rather ambiguous and

ambivalent (as otherwise, it would have turned into a caricature rather than a myth) – a complex myth, with both comical and tragic features, where the potency of Ionescu's writing in French is verified". Here too, Matei Călinescu is categorical, ascertaining that, like Beckett, a truly perfect bilingual, Ionesco suffered identity modifications of a linguistic nature, simply because, in the final analysis, his father's language had been "the language in which he had done his difficult literary apprenticeship".

Learning a foreign language "may just be a gate towards the discovery of Universal banality, of absurdity and, at the same time, of the generic tragedy of language yet, it can be the first resort of the impulse to set language on fire, stoking the blaze by dislocating it from the clichés and stereotypes" (p. *122*) certifying a linguistic identity, which had been segregated to the point of it becoming contradictory, a "semantically centripetal tendency of textual effects" (p. 151, *author's added emphasis*) even, the meaning of which rendering that the resulting "apparent chaos (or idiocy) reverberates with a quasi-musical internal necessity, permanently counteracting". Matei Călinescu insists upon Ionesco's language, more precisely on the availability of Ionescu's plays to be perceived as a confession, an "avowal" of an internal world, "chopped to pieces, disembowelled, a mirror or symbol of Universal contradictions".

The superimposition on names, the duality of identity in Ionescu/Ionesco lodges a complaint about a "stigmatised identity" (p. *46*) whereby the onomastic ambiguity between "roumain" and "romanichel" (whereby the latter has the unequivocally pejorative meaning of "gypsy") brings to the fore the problem of being a foreigner in France, and the various avatars of his plays as emblems of a diffuse linguistic identity. The distinction between *identity* and *alterity* employs the same analogy used in *interior – exterior*, via a series of abstract reasoning reactions. Moreover, this is about questioning the importance of role-play, of finding out the connections between text and biography. Though aware of Eugen Ionescu's Romanian cultural filiations, Matei Călinescu does not dwell on the matter. Caragiale and Urmuz, both of whom are spiritually close to Ionesco, are not recognised as Romanian influences, despite the fact that Ionesco translates Urmuz's work into French while adapting and translating, alongside Monica Lovinescu, excerpts from Caragiale.

### *The obsession of language*

The strategy of delaying the delivery of the message via ludic insertions or through the use of the words' "paralysing magic of seduction" is one of Ionescu's texts' intrinsic ability to becoming opaque in their resistance against decoding. Matei Călinescu lifts (Sabina) "Popeea's veil" and, as the critical epic journey seems to turn fictitious, his book become humanised and the spaces are presented without stage props whilst the perception of the foreigner who comes to France lends itself either a self-critical austerity or the premature attributes of a mythology: Paris thus turns into a city which no longer destroys, but rather enriches his personality, a city where it is shameful to be seen as a tyrant. Thus, it becomes apparent how the verbal and the (pseudo-) logical game-plays interfere, while in subsidiary, they succeed in taming "the mystery of evil, with the help of laughter which seems to acquire an exorcising role" (p. *153*), in the sense attributed to it by Antonin Artaud. For instance, if linguistic stereotypes are exploited in "The Bald Soprano" then, in "The Lesson", we notice

how the characters express the word's autarchy by transferring the accumulated anguish upon others, whereas in "Jacques or Obedience", "subject to immense exaggerations yet, with a finely tuned musical ear, language is subjected to Ionescu's typical distortions […], a play on echoes, allusions, literal translations of colloquial words and phrases, comical *non sequitur*, juxtapositions of contradictory terms, words with prefixes or suffixes intentionally misplaced, rhymes, assonances and funny alliterations" (p. *154–155*). Maybe "The Chairs" is his only piece of work where the means of expression become "a saintly duty", whereby the entire Universe seems to have been left waiting to hear the message, which has to come from the Speaker yet, this is a character which is mute and incapable of uttering anything and thus unfit to deliver the message.

Matei Călinescu's script (sic!) is built as a sheer balancing act between *uttering as such* and *waiting for* (Godot?) *some essential revelation*. The critic shifts the focus from the canvas of closures to that of contrasts *muteness*/*loquaciousness*, *solitude*/*crowd*, *visible*/*invisible*, playfulness and an *apparent lowest common denominator*. In "The Chairs", for instance, both the Old Man as well as his Old Lady are fretting in wait for the Guest, the owner of existential truths, to arrive while the Orator is running late, thus accentuating the anguish of the two acting characters. The critic himself is muted. His analysis is but the catalyst for plural interpretations. The conscience of discontinuity becomes therefore essential, both for the discourse's utterance and for the way in which life itself is received as such. The muted, autistic Orator refuses the *speakers* and, instead of giving an answer to the old peoples' pleas to end their waiting, an utter silence is drawn, one which does not even allow an echo that may lead to interpretation; there is nothing in the uttered word to potentialise language; rather, there is a silence insinuating itself, gradually and irreversibly, in the gap arisen between the speakers, and between the language used and the message.

Matei Călinescu returns to the issue of identity, obsessive and unable to be found a resolution to. Outraged and exiled from his own environment, "Eugen Ionescu felt ill at ease inside the Romanian culture, not so much because this was small and peripheral (a "poor relative" of the great European cultures rather, though this too, represented a considerable obstacle), but mainly because of its obsessive preoccupation with its own "specificity", the so-called "national character", responsible for its stifling parochialism, an authentic hurdle against it managing to find an answer to grand, existential issues" (p. *9*). The split identity Eugen Ionescu/ Eugène Ionesco: "If I were French, I might have been a genius" reveals "an identity dilemma – of a family, ethnic, linguistic and, of course, cultural nature (including here others which were literary, confessional and political) – which was soon turned into an inner conflict that incorporated, or better still, *was incorporated within* his relationship with his mother and within his open conflict, often revealed by Ionesco himself, with his father – a personal conflict that may even have had an Oedipus-complex about it (if we are to believe in psychoanalysis, including here Jacques Lacan's theory about "Le-Nom-du-Père", but a conflict which was undoubtedly cultural and political" (p. *41*).

It is important to note how Matei Călinescu focuses on an identity palimpsest of elements, on superimposing oneiric episodes, lyrical and symbolical, and on the "reality-checks, igniting roars of laughter in the audience" (p. *378*). Also, the never-ending absurdity as much as the linguistic deregulation mechanisms determine, in Matei Călinescu's perspective, "Ionescu's oneiric realism" i.e. "the constancy towards the *dream's reality*, that "live" transcription of

the dream's content and profound reality, obviously, within the confines structured by the internal logic of dramas, performance and showmanship" (p. *386*). Eugène Ionesco combines distinct linguistic realities, thus forcing an apocalyptic *message* for transmission, which is affixing all other truths in the world, in order to de-structure his own discourse. Yet, the question remains as to the measure in which these identity conflicts could have been resolved, especially if one considers how the critic's opinion raises further and further questions and increasingly fewer answers. Matei Călinescu filters Ionescu's French experience by constantly measuring it against his writings during the time he was based in Romania. The language used there is voided of all signifiers whilst the waiting dehumanizes: "the character's identity resembles an empty identity resonance box, from which can be heard either one voice, or another, carrying different tonalities and the most varied of implications, for longer or shorter periods of time, in an apparently haphazard sequence" (p. *389*). Ionesco's characters blend in with the objects populating our living space, in the sense awarded to it by Baudrillard (in *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*, Paris, Éditions Denoël, 1970): "we live under the muted guise of hallucinating and obedient objects, that keep repeating the same old discourse, a sign of our jelly-fish 'power'". In fact, this type of muted communication is, for Eugène Ionesco, but a ritual, a mask and a transfer of power.

The oniric episodes superimpose themselves onto the absurd repetition of broken mechanisms. Many of the dreams dramatised in *The Man with Suitcases* and *Journeys Among the Dead* can be found in Ionesco's journals: *Fragments of a Journal* (1966), *Present Past/Past Present* (1971), *Antidotes* (1977), *The Man in Question* (*Un homme en question*, Gallimard, 1979), *The Intermittent Quest* (1988). The transcription of reality (considered as real and not as a (meta-) fiction about fiction), imbuing characters with desolation and panic is what turns his characters into brutish occurrences, derailing their existence. Though precarious, communication still remains functional, at least at a subliminal level. Reminiscences from these indecisive yet, incisive communications determine a revamping of the codes. Characters refuse their identity, even though they seem to be searching for one, whilst being mistaken for the objects that surround them.

To conclude with, (I would venture saying that) whilst lacking in psychological consistency, Ionescu's marionette-like characters risk turning into the objects of a farce which transcends them, subjected to the same type of pity that ancient tragedy characters were forced to endure. The balancing act between one state or another, between one option and the next, both of whom are as much restricting as they are blameworthy, suffocate the discourse into a type of exiled loneliness which is voided of any significance whatsoever and where psychotic pleasures become aesthetical. Total communication is viewed as total refusal. The only option available rests with living a role thus, living by proxy as the need for mediation is permanent while creating a network dependency. Matei Călinescu allows us to see in books not just mere (work) tools, but also lives waiting to be avowed; moreover, they allow us to distinguish between the life of a character and that of a narrator, even if, at some point, they superimpose one another.

## NOTE

1 Matei Călinescu, [*Eugène Ionesco: identity and existential themes*], *Eugen Ionescu, Teme identitare și existențiale*, Iași, Junimea, 2006, 494 pages.