













# Constantin MIHAI

# Europenism și dileme identitare în România interbelică gruparea Criterion



Editura Muzeului Național al Literaturii Române













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# **ADDENDA**

### **Abstract**

If we question the background of a modern culture that has offered clear proof of its excellence, it doesn't mean we mistrust its reputation. Still, it has been some criticism centered on this aspect, criticism that derives from the social sciences. Referring a culture's content to the social forces that sustains it, bestowing a special importance to the collective manifestations against the forms of individual expression and preferring the latent message against the stated one, the social sciences would lead to disclaiming the existence of an hierarchy – through the intellectual values – in exchange for a cultural relativism where all forms of expression and all periods count.

Our project tries to emphasize a singular moment of Romanian's modern culture: the case of the *Criterion* group – an essential group consisting of the interwar intellectual elite. Even though it has been active only for a short period of time, its profile was marked by the cultural practices and representations. The purpose of this intercession is essential for the intellectual history's economy: highlighting a stage where the most Europeanist group proposed a specific method to approach the theme of identity, to the injury of any ethnocentric rhetoric and pious reflex and of some automatism and autochthonism that were striking the solidarity of a cultural space. This group brought together young generation's interwar elite: from Mircea Vulcănescu and Petru Comarnescu – the founders of the group, to Mircea Eliade, Emil Cioran, Horia Stamatu, Dan Botta, Constantin Noica, Alexandru Christian Tell, Paul Sterian, Arșavir and Haig Acterian, Mihail Polihroniade, Paul Costin Deleanu and others.

When the elaboration and determination of such an important moment of cultural Europeanism is in connection with Criterion's name – a special meaning, that refers to the original root of the Greek word: *krinein* =

to judge, form a critical judgment, but not in the way of nihilism, as an final expression of criticism, but in the way of comparing what happens to the natural and objective way of how things should happen, of a constructive criticism-, then such an intercession is not only one of restitution, reclaimed in the side of collective memory and cultural identity, but also one of meaning retrieval, in the perimeter of a adaptation that generates existence and dialogue with other consubstantial spaces.

The paper consists of five sequential units: Criterion's development inside the interwar school, Criterion's conceptual representations, Criterion's conference's dynamics, Criterion's practices, ideology and politics; the end of the Criterionist adventure.

In the first chapter concerning Criterion's development inside the interwar school, the radiography of the relevance between Nae Ionescu and some of Criterion's representatives, that have different attitudes inside this bloc, expresses some indisputable aspects, such as: the existence of a conaturality between the master and his followers, the shaping of some major dimensions inside this School – authenticity, structure, personalization -, the existence of an innovative way of thinking and a specific *modus vivendi*, the attainment of a *paideic* instruction that will fructify later through criterionists practices and representations.

Criterion's analysis, as a manifestation of a unique phenomenon of Romanian intellectual interwar history, cannot be possible in the absence of two fundamental operational concepts: *genus proximus* and *differentia specificae*: the first term referring to the common denominator of this group, and the second concept referring to the age diversity of its members. The intellectual group, Criterion, which functions in the same triple registry: social, cultural and ideological, represents the fundamental chapter of Romanian modern intellectual history that appears as a model, although for a short historical period.

Criterion's analysis could not be possible without highlighting its steam, around which many personalities have irradiated. Nae Ionescu is – invariably- the common denominator of this group, an expression of the young interwar generation, or of the '27 generation, the cornerstone, or simply: the reason for the possibility of any discussion about this

generation's existence. Therefore, building Criterion inside Nae Ionescu's School is essential, being the presupposition on which we create the whole functional theory of this intellectual group.

Without abolishing also the existence of some other tangential contaminations on this group: Dimitrie Gusti for the representatives of the young generation sociological direction – contamination that is more related to a structured, technical way of work, not his beliefs – Nae Ionescu and his School's decisive role in Criterion's movement remains essential.

The second chapter of the paper taps the generational problematic, emphasizing its conceptual representations. Criterion's history works based on some organic solidarity that modeled and structured this group of intellectuals, giving it a special unity. This unity is also given by the specific sociability form of this intellectual group, sociability that hallmarks any intellectual generation. Criterion is an unusual phenomenon, since (in terms of history) it can be considered as being a *short generation*, because of its short existence, of almost two years, but it has continued to function as a *long generation*, through its valuable members' prolongations, both outside and inside the closed context of the communist Romania.

Two approaches are possible in the proper definition of the intellectual generation: a first approach endorses the birth of the intellectual generation as a result of some Youngman's encounter with an event or a creationist crisis, leaving a common hallmark: a war or a convulsion of the national community. The main objection that can be brought to this approach is that these crises do not concern only one age class (generation), but, through their amplitude, the whole civic structure.

The second approach implies the fact that the intellectual generations appear and develop into a much wider perspective than the political one. The objection that can be brought to this type of approach implies avoiding the ideological dimension of the generation, eliding that *forma mentis* that structures an intellectual group. In fact, the generational effect appears inside an age-range, recognized later by the collective memory, often abusively, as being representative for the whole intellectual space.

The concept of generation pandered suspicion and reticence for a long time: suspicion because the age-range succession is an inherent phenomenon of the societies, and reticence because the term of generation was associated to other two concepts: the short time and the event.

Criterion's generation should be analyzed in the context of the tension between tradition and modernity, as it tries to find that central formula to combine the vernacularism with Occidental European's ideas. In fact, the dialogue revolved around two types of models: the Community model and the Association model. The organic invoked by the young interwar generation, following in Nae Ionescu's tracks, does not identify itself with the ethnic underlayer, but it does with the relationship established at people's everyday existence level.

Hereby, they did not evoke the forces contented inside the political class, but the organic solidarities – as it implies some sort of a public space. This does not come against the European spirit, but against the individualist one. In other terms, it is not about breaching Romania from Europe, but about attaching the Romanian culture to the conservatism established in a continental movement, with a clearly stated doctrine, outside the abuses of the French Revolution.

The source of inspiration regarding the concept of generation, which generated ample intellectual debates during the interwar period, is represented by Nae Ionescu. This concept needed a theoretical elucidation regarding the former generations. In contradistinction to the old generation, which's mission was the fulfilling of the national ideal, achieved on the 1st December 1918, the post-war generation considered as an ideal creating a strong culture, to carry the mark of the Romanian spirit.

In the perspective of the Romanian intellectual history, the apparition of this group supposed the realization of the model elitist coordinate, both critical and lucid, in the continuation of Maiorescu's program and of the historical one of the 1906 generation. While the 1906 generation proposed as a purpose fulfilling the historical ideal, through the unitary state of the modern nation, Criterion tried to offer a valid cultural project leading to the revelation of the elites, positioning *paidea's* track, through Europeanism.

The concept of generation becomes a major one, through comparative and demonstrative reporting to the previous generations, and through the permanent referral to the European generation. The young generation's profile, eloquently formulated by one of it's founders, Mircea Vulcănescu, gravitates around two central points: experience and politics; neoclassicism, purism, anti-historism, skepticism and agony; dialectical spiritualism, dualism, salvation through culture, idealism and Christianity.

The young interwar generation's mission is to assure the synthesis between objectivism and authenticity, not through imitation, but through adequate methods that respond to the intellectual elite's specific problems. These are specific: first – having the meaning of deliberate orientation linked to the historical and local surroundings (Noica) and then with the meaning of authentic living and universal problem solving by ingrained consciences in the Romanian environment (Eliade, Vulcănescu, Cioran). Through this second condition, the young generation tries to unravel a problem that was crucial for the Romanian culture, for over a century: the relationship between vernacularism and universalism and global integration.

Criterion's representations acquire consistence through the three fundamental concepts: generation, spirituality and experience, which give the measure of complexity to a intellectual group that combined vernacularism's tradition with the occidental idea's movement. The intellectual debate, provoked by the young generation, around these concepts, highlights the conscience of elite that this generation impressed to the Romanian space, through the major role assumed, in forming a new strong culture; open to a teeming dialogue with the European intellectual backgrounds.

Moreover, these concepts, as operational instruments, are the essence for understanding the functioning mechanism of the Criterionist elite, which refers not only to a generational becoming, but also to a natively spiritual tradition, which assures its specificity in the Romanian intellectual history.

The third chapter is dedicated to the dynamic of the criterionists conferences. Criterion's presence in the public space through these conferential cycles became more and more striking since it was not just a simple *captatio benevolentiae*, but the idea of creating a new mood in Romanian's modern culture. Criterion's activity in the public space was visible through two specific forms:

- 1. The conferences that this group kept between 1932-1933;
- 2. The so called *practices* or *cultural representations* by involving the new interwar generation, coordinated by Nae Ionescu, in the great debates of the interwar period, where the intellectual elite's role was that of correcting the possible skids that different types of authorities (both lay and charismatic) were producing. In fact, the participation of the young generation to these cultural and spiritual debates will build the premises of Criterion's future homogenization, in the perspective of outlining an authentic elite that will assume the fulfillment of the cultural ideal.

Criterion's specificity consists of the conference practice as a cultural manifestation form inside the public space. More exactly, they preferred the *conference of speakers*, a special type of conference that is based on the contradictory debate of the same subject, by three or more participants.

The plural approach of the same subject caused polemics and critical ideas, just like those *disputations*, representing the innovation and originality of this type of conference. The apparition of a fine and erudite polemic trained the public's participation, creating a connatural link between the audience and the lecturers. Through these conferences, Criterion restored a solid intellectual tradition, constituting the mark of a strong and healthy culture.

The Criterionist debates that threw together different ideological positions formed a new direction in Romanian's modern culture. It could be considered as a prolongation – in another horizon of expectations – of the *Junimea group*. The terms: *Criterion* and *symposium*, just like *forum*, have been introduced in the interwar circuit by Petru Comarnescu. The spirit of ideas confrontation, of contradictory debates has been lifted by the Criterion group at a new, lofty scientific level. The discursive spontaneity assures the effervescence of the criterionists conferences.

By rejecting any exclusivity, simple attitudes or hollow rhetoric, Criterion's conferences proved a new manner of creating culture: essential themes for that specific historical context, in an atmosphere of intellectual elegance, themes discussed from plural perspectives, with a substantial, academic argumentation, everything based on the dimension of the constructive criticism, not dissolutive criticism.

Through these conferences of speakers, Criterion brings back the authentic intellectual tradition of Europeanism. To discuss great themes of the occidental culture, without neglecting the details of the national culture, represented Criterion's *sui generis* method of being innovative, original and synchronized to the European intellectual flux. This way, it is possible to mention Criterion's spirit – some sort of *lanus bifrons*- in the Romanian modern culture, in the way of a restorer force for the interwar space, a force that tries to rebuild, through the conference practice, the lost bound with the European spirituality.

Another fundamental dimension of this project stands in revealing those mechanisms of Criterion's practices and cultural attitudes that are related to the evolutional process of intellectual maturity of a space, in which the training of the elites did not follow a basic direction, but an urgent one - of the cultural imperative of the time.

The attention paid to the intellectual history implies an important registry's decipherment, that of the relationship between identity and different existence, of the combination between what we call the national specificity and its projection in universality, without ignoring the relevance between cultural and ideological. The elite's circulation of which Vilfredo Pareto was speaking, that solidarity given by a specific hierarchic structure and a specific behaviorist attitude, is relevant in Criterion's case, mainly through the solidarity network created through its members and the impact on the audience. Therefore, following Raymond Aron's typology on elites, we can perceive Criterion as an aristocracy of the spirit.

Even though we tend to have the false idea or prejudice that the theme of the elites is a mainly traditionalist one, belonging to the identity agenda, especially in the *meritocracy elites*' case, that are not the free, industrial society's revenue, we have in Criterion's case a confutation of this theory, insomuch as the relevance of such a cultural phenomenon belonged not only to a recalibration of the European tradition, but also of a truly original, creative and open to the great intellectual problems of the period, method of approach. Some of the problems are extremely fresh, even in our postmodernism: let's just mention the relationship between the Church and the state, the lay and theological instruction's purpose, the inter-confessional approach.

One of the elements of the specific interwar historical context is constituted from the elite's position and its image. The meritocratic ideal focuses once again on the traditional terms of the elite's social reproduction on familial bases. This type of reproduction does not have legitimacy any more, for as long as the intellectual represents, in the interwar context, at least through the social imaginary level, the product of a new type of elite generator, based – primordially- on a maximum of competence and self-recruitment.

This new type of reproduction's characteristic is its selection from the Universities, as it happened in Criterion's case. The obliteration of the intellectuals from the strength field represents one of the origins of these new forms of public intervention's inventions.

Our intercession sights the cultural history's explication upon the relationship between ideological and the cultural as a real equation that has adjusted, somehow, Criterion's functional mechanism. On this line, we propose a plural approach for this intellectual group, from the perspective of the intellectual history and the history of ideas, starting from the structural relationship that is developed between cultural and ideological, seen in a larger sense of mentality, of *forma mentis*, and not in a restrictive, political sense.

The forth chapter disputes the relationship between ideology and politics, highlighting the end of the criterionist adventure. In a context where the international political scene was profoundly split into two distinctive camps: the Russian socialism and the European fascism, Criterion Association could not avoid, at some point, this fall into the space of the ideologies, against its cultural and spiritual challenge. This fight between left and right – even though in the European space, the right was not represented by the fascism, seen ideologically still as an appendix of the left, - but, more exactly, of the nationalist movements.

In the interwar Romania, the ideological cleavage between left and right was very clear: socialism (communism) and national Christianity. The young criterionist generation was confronting with this ideological battle that has dominated both the native and the international space.

The relationship between ideology and politics becomes a categorical one for Criterion inasmuch way that inside the group it there are many new orientations: the orientation towards the socialist and communist left, the orientation towards the national-Christian right, tendency that becomes major inside the group, the orientation towards the traditionalist right and the democratic orientation (Petru Comarnescu, Eugen Ionescu).

The interwar Romania will have known these ideological ingravescence avatars: right versus left, while the young generation also had as a mission the spiritual fulfillment – creating an interior revolution, that of reformation of the new man, able to bring back the lost moral display and to splice the national identity to Christianity's pristine tradition (the Orthodoxy).

Criterion's unity will have been broken by a series of events that appear by the end of 1933, events that have aggravate the tensions between its members, ruining the organic solidarities between them and driving to its dissolution. The rejection of thought manifestation, the attempt over the thinking primate as a possibility of thought expression for the young generation represented *primum movens* in the equability and unity fall between Criterion's members. Plus, there was the strong state censorship that wanted by any mean to obstruct Criterion's activity, for they became too popular – leading to forbidding their manifestation in the public space.

Criterion's story represents an important page of Romanian modern intellectual history, a history pointed by the presence of a young interwar generation that tried to embody the Romanian idea (originality, personalism, creativity, the liberty of thought and maximum competence) in the national culture and to recalibrate it to the European idea (the intellectual tradition and occidental spirituality).

Criterion represents the plenitude of the free manifestation of the thought and the spirit, inside a constructive exercise of criticism, compulsory to a solid and healthy intellectual tradition. Even though is apparently unequal and contradictory in the manner of attitudes and orientations, the Criterion association fulfills the cultural and spiritual ideal of the modern Romania: organicism and universal aperture, cosmopolitanism and elitism, tradition and innovation.

Criterion's intellectual history not only is essential for the study of ideas from the interwar period, but it also allows the questioning over the fight of ideas and ideologies from the Romanian society, mostly at the different type of representation level. From this perspective, Criterion's mapping becomes emblematic for the history of ideas and elites: in their role of ideas producers, the criterionist intellectuals are, above all, actors of the cultural. Studying them involves the establishment at the crossing between cultural and social history, in the prolongations of the history of mentalities.

Our intention of highlighting the intellectual history is submersed to the cultural history, since the approach of collective representations becomes one of the inner criterionist phenomena. The attention that we pay to the functioning mechanisms of the criterionist elite drives invariably to the dimension of the cultural practices, definitive for the *modus vivendi* of this intellectual group.

The revelation of such a project is related not only to its recovery dimension, the restoration of an important page of intellectual history that leans on the Romanian modern culture, of commemorating of some European cultural models, but also of the urgent recall of a solid intellectual tradition of creativity, freedom, personal thinking, competence and authenticity. The intellectual history of Criterion represents the measure of a modern culture in its way to Europeanism, without neglecting the identity roots to which it refers every time, for a better disposal and reference to a solid, creative, original and profound intellectual space.

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