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ACADEMIA ROMÂNĂ



Antonio PATRAŞ

E. Lovinescu și modelele românești și europene ale criticii literare interbelice



Editura Muzeului Național al Literaturii Române



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**E. LOVINESCU ȘI MODELELE ROMÂNEȘTI
ȘI EUROPENE ALE CRITICII LITERARE INTERBELICE**



E. LOVINESCU ȘI MODELELE ROMÂNEȘTI
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ADDENDA

Summary

The present paper develops along three sections. In its first part, we try to sketch E. Lovinescu's portrait, bearing in mind both his confessions, and their correspondent critical ideas. This presented to us as the most appropriate method to follow the evolution of personality during the years, from the writer's prime to his maturity. The second section approaches the genesis of critical ideas, by tracing their inner crystallisation in relationship to both the national and the European context. Thus, for the youth writings, we inquire into the virtual interaction between the critic's vision and the two main traits of Romanian criticism at the end of the 19th century (chiefly, in correlation with Maiorescu and Gherea's models). Then, we reassess his thought's borrowings from localistic trends such as 'Sămănătorism' and 'Poporanism', on the one hand, and from Symbolism, on the other, adding a special emphasis on the 'impressionist' touches, undertook from France and Faguet's works.

We also intend to grasp the proper means to spot Lovinescu's critical system, by appealing to several significant moments of the Romanian and European literary criticism, as it figured itself during the inter-bellum period. Consequently, the third section focuses on the doctrine works as such (namely, *Istoria civilizației române moderne – The History of Modern Romanian Civilisation* and *Istoria literaturii române contemporane – The History of Contemporary Romanian Literature*). The integrationist perspective provided by the general frame of cultural analysis represents the methodological standpoint of the present study. Hence, the investigation and the foray of Lovinescu's sources must always stick to mentalities in general, and to the ideological bedrock of his criticism. Most of all, we found that the capital trace on Lovinescu's works is left by a *sui generis* humanist and liberal thought, marked with imprints of individualism and

rationalism. The latter chisels a larger background formed by the local traditions and bourgeois values.

Generally, the analysis led us both to the springs of Lovinescu's critical ideas, and to his personality's shaping process. After an attentive dissociation of the core works (that is, the canonical texts) from the bulk of less-known writings (such as the newspaper productions), we proceeded to comparison and deduction. Among our aims, we shall suffice in counting the following: 1. to identify the Western sources, both implicit and explicit, that contributed to the concretion of an original critical system; 2. to emphasize the specific traits, as well as the theoretical and ideological undercurrents; 3. to work on a frame of analysis for a topic such as the genesis of critical thinking, and to tune it to the history of ideas; 4. to evince a bourgeois ethos and ideology, which ground Lovinescu's mind on literature.

To throw a glimpse into the genesis of thought means to work into the keynote critical ideas, currently known amongst scholars as 'modernism', 'synchronism', 'the mutation of aesthetical values' and so forth. Some of them apparently had already crystallized before the First World War and yet gained real ascendancy only in the inter-bellum period and only as a reverberation of the Liberal doctrine circumscribed by "Sburătorul" circle and by the modernist critic's great synthesis, *Istoriei civilizației române moderne – The History of Modern Romanian Civilization*. Therefore, a consistent part of our demonstration focuses on Lovinescu's paradoxical and, most of the times, wry definitions and understandings of 'modernity' and 'modernism'. They bespeak not only the critic's attempt to find and neutralize, throughout convincing explanations, the real source of these contradictions – that is, the particular traits of Lovinescu's own psychology and somehow 'in-between' personality – but also a similar process of relocation and neutralisation, which can be traced in the Romanian society itself. Our psychological assumptions on both 'transition' society and its prominent figures led to a mirrored scheme: the theoretical and doctrinaire inconsistencies (a certain blending of Liberalism and Conservatism in Lovinescu's own discourse on 'the necessity of revisions')

cannot be perceived but as a system of communicating vessels, apt to register the deep social convulsions worked out after either World Wars.

More precisely, E. Lovinescu appears to have understood the psychological values within a very loose conceptual frame. However, psychology becomes a key-concept of his work, because it organises the other terms organically, according to a communicant vase system. Starting from psychological assumptions, the critic believes to have deciphered the great mysteries of creation: 1. the writers' personality in general, which fits in a psychologist hermeneutics, a fair 'interpretative' method; 2. the critic's own personality, branded either in the circle of his 'memoirs' (as a speech on *persona*, that is, the public image of the critic-as-writer) or in the cycle of his novels (as a fictional speech on the critic's 'person', conveyed within the intimate space of emotional intercourse); 3. the genesis of Romanian modern civilization as a dynamics of form (the pattern hinted at, the model imitated by the society or civilization) and content (the race's psychological inclinations); 4. the aesthetic value, as an echo of particular taste fluctuations. In the same manner, the dynamics of personality reflects – as Lovinescu would say – the same binary mechanism. First, we should follow the descent of 'forms' to 'contents' (translated, on the individual level, as an activation of 'the natural temper' through the reins of 'will') then, we have to pay attention to what makes the 'creative difference', resounding into the vibes of 'the national keynote'. Coming back to the individual soul, Lovinescu applies his theory in order to explain the notion of 'natural temper'/ temperament (in his special case, the 'Moldavian' fibre, in other words, a collective psychological content, which realizes itself as a particular aspect of race, and may comprise Walach traits as well). Considering the various contexts where the aforementioned notion occurs (whether as 'psychical' or 'psychological', and so forth), we are constrained, within the present analysis, to acknowledge its shifting quality. We chose not to determine its precise definition in order to catch the natural flow of Lovinescu's thinking. Furthermore, our choice respects his virtual theoretical sources, namely the 'Einfühlung' approach (the 'In-feeling' approach), laid open especially in those articles which exalt either the 'I' or subjectivism in general. Coming last, we noticed that, in spite of its permanent drive toward objectivity and dogmatic formulae (also called 'the

critic's Apollonian mask'), the effluence from Psychoanalysis and Phenomenology keeps the conceptual blur among the concepts deriving from 'psyche'.

E. Lovinescu received his due acknowledgment as the main representative of the Romanian inter-bellum culture. His aesthetic criticism pleaded for the necessary modernization of our literature, by means of imitating salient Western models. Although his image in posterity represents a conglomerate of mere clichés, the critic proves to be, under close-scrutiny, a complex theorist (even though, quite often, a rather contradictory one). He aimed to assess literature from a psycho-sociological point of view and to articulate a consistent theory on personality, by focusing particularly those processes that recur during our inner development. The branded 'theory of forms without content' served Lovinescu as a marvellous hypothesis to assess the emergence of Romanian modern civilization. Therefore, the critic's coherent program hinted at the modernisation of Romanian literature, having as central pillars theories such as 'the primate of aesthetical value' and the urge for 'synchronisation'. In any case, the harsh aestheticism proceeded rather uniformly, as a levelling agent, loosing from sight all virtual exceptions.

For practical reasons (he imperiously had to back up his program with a theoretical platform, solid enough to keep his ideological opponents at bay), Lovinescu would be working for several years on his doctrinal book, *The History of Romanian Civilization*. Afterwards, this would offer enough ground for further historiography works, written in a comprehensive and synthesizing vein. Sociologically speaking, the critic's seminal book relies on Constantin Dobrogeanu-Gherea's former idea, according to which, in capitalist societies, social forms actually express social contents. The phenomenon appears as a direct consequence of their vocation for progress. Conversely, in economically underdeveloped nations, the social content continuously adapts to social forms. It is no wonder that Lovinescu's study also indebts Titu Maiorescu's older theory on 'the forms without content'. Anyway, Lovinescu proceeds to a reversed reading, that is, by describing the opposite process; its scientific backup might find some common points with řtefan Zeletin's studies, himself a

redoubtable specialist on the dynamics of Romanian bourgeoisie, always ready to shatter the speculations of the Romanian literati, from the 'Junimea' circle up to the recent-date headliners.

In his self-effacing manner, Lovinescu does not claim to have any other competences than those of a literary critic and, thus, labels his study as being nothing more than an 'essay in social and cultural psychology'. Indeed, his *History...* does not aim to correct any of the scholars' approaches to the matter, but rather to unify and systematize his own critical thought, which, at that time, had not crystallized yet into a definitive version (and therefore, the partial validity of Zeletin's objections to Lovinescu's ideas). It is obvious that the young critic's urge to consecrate has always superseded his genuine thirst for knowledge. The latter had never been that strong so as to get into the way of the steady feuilleton reviewer. Let us admit that it is barely possible to dedicate oneself to systematic research, when, on a regular basis, the reputable critic had to submit, here and there, a bunch of sundry contributions. Whence the eclecticism and, at times, even inconsistency of the aesthetic ideas Lovinescu would entertain in that alertly sophistic manner, characterizing the latter-day apprenticeship to Faguet and Anatole France's school. An accomplished apprentice, though ... To dogmatize the hedonistic impressionism was therefore a must, since it came along naturally from a psychological postulate: we are under the necessity to reduce to unity all spiritual processes; otherwise, we would face the risk of total dissolution, of outpouring intelligence, of inextricable nuances and dissociations.

Trying to capture the process of his personality's constitution (in a series of *memoirs*, published in 1930) with a concept as accurate as possible, Lovinescu actually arrives – after loitering a bit in a sort of 'bracket' preamble – to his self-fulfilment. He maintains that there is an organic bond between the individuals and their corresponding 'race'. A true connoisseur of sociological research methods (based on collecting and checking the empirical data as supplied by facts), Stefan Zeletin dismisses, on very good grounds, the alleged 'law' of evolution of the Romanian society. The Neoliberal ideologue does not count on the 'high-speed' imitation of superior forms, as professed by Lovinescu. Thus, the birth of modern Romania

would not have occurred as the outcome of mimetic enthusiasm, manifested by a handful of straw revolutionaries, in the aftermath of their Western enlightenment. It is rather the immediate effect of commodity circulation, particularly of the British capital, interested in the Danube circulation. *Ergo*: it was not the ideology of the French Revolution (the vast majority of Romanians did not have a clue of it!), but the recent capitalist economy that triggered the spectacular evolution of our culture and civilization. Let us not forget that, likewise, Tocqueville discovered the origins of the Revolution not so much in Voltaire's ideas, but rather in the excessive centralism of the old regime. Later on, Norbert Elias would describe the civilizing process as an outcome of the decay of nobility, completed by the triumph of the middle-class. The former appear to have been prone to spontaneity and naturalness, two moral traits that, in terms of social '*realia*', would have been held in high repute. Once with the advent of capitalism, the latter acquire some credit, by introducing the *surveillé* and mimetic behaviour, codified as 'good manners' and 'Disciplinarianism'. Anyway, Zeletin's arguments are surefooted; a comprehensive bibliography and a truly modern vision on social dynamics, understood as a manifestation of certain complex objective structures, account that the realities of the newborn Romanian civilization do not stick to the terms of mere psychological motivation, as the old school used to put it.

Paradoxically, Lovinescu seems more connected to the sociology of the 19th century, since he claims to have borrowed his theory on imitation from Gabriel Tarde, whose vision he revises only in details, without rejecting his forerunner's psychologist drifts when, for instance, he describes the formation of human societies. Consequently, although he does not break with the psychologist theory, the Romanian critic attempts to switch the terms of the equation (whose contents are actually the same) along the lines of an already established evolution, from content to form. Hence, while social phenomena basically represent for Tarde 'reiterated individual acts', and society is conceived as being the expression of individual free-will, Lovinescu does not part with the individual order. On the contrary, he subordinates the latter, from the very start, to society and race, and then redraws the trajectory from general to individual by following a causal type of logic. Thus, Lovinescu's sociology draws much

from ethno-psychology, a science abounding in positivist features and guilty of sins that had once tempted Eminescu himself. When revisited at the turn of the 20th century, the Romanians' national poet is discovered in his new 'capacity', as prophet and reactionary ideologue, exalting a folk mystique and a *passeïsm* of the purest Romantic stock. Nonetheless, while the genial poet advocated the organic state (resorting to a 'physiocrate' definition), the modernist Lovinescu shows an interest in the rational grounds of the social contract, following the footsteps of the Enlightenment political thinking.

A rationalist spirit, able to meditate without being disturbed by affects, but categorically inaccurate in conceptual quarters ("everything beyond logic is none of my interest", he once stated), Lovinescu intended to explain the formation of our modern civilization as a revolutionary process, entailing the progressive principles of liberal ideology. In view of that goal, he collects an impressive amount of historical data, which surpassed by far G. Ibrăileanu's (prevailingly literary) sources of in his seminal work, *Spiritul critic în cultura românească* (*The Critical Spirit in Romanian Culture*, 1909). In spite of his sparse sociological knowledge and his now-and-then sophistic arguments, the literary master of *Sburatorul* cuts himself a convincing figure, by dint of pungent style and seamless elegance. He also has the courage to propose a number of extremely interesting hypotheses, occasionally found in the future works of more systematic minds. For instance (maybe also wanting to answer Zeletin's objections to the issue of 'forms without content'), Lovinescu relates the modernization of Romanian civilization almost exclusively to the ideological factor. In turn, he minimizes the role played by economy, a tenet confirmed later on by Karl Popper, who, in his book *Open Society and Its Enemies* (1945), criticizes the anti-individualist theories and credits ideas with the agency of change, while they are bearing an essential role in configuring civilizations.

In a nutshell, E. Lovinescu's work builds on a broad humanistic and bourgeois ideal, nurtured by sources such as Thibaudet's line of thinking, the French Impressionism, and the Anglo-Saxon essay and historiography. These justify why the Romanian critic credited psychology with a leading role among other sciences. Besides, his manner of exegesis – mainly 'serial'

criticism and ‘pop’ novel – drives us to the core of the ‘bourgeois experience’, shaped upon melodramatic patterns, less elitist and more sensitive to emotional realities. The present work insists on the dramatic importance of ‘Lovinescu’ brand, yet not as an ‘Apollonian’ model, as in the previous approaches. Is it possible to gaze on a more ‘human’ figure of the critic? As a matter fact, it is and, alongside, we have to expect for a new ‘humanity’ transfusion into the slack veins of literary studies.

Taking into consideration the human-centred approach, we might even assume that Lovinescu’s literature is not as bad as said beforehand. Actually, it contains a sensational profusion of details and intimate circumstances, which, brought together with biographical accounts, with both the critic’s and his contemporaries’ confessions, add a lot of rich nuances to the ‘coined’ portrait. Beyond their documentary value, the critic’s novels – generally labelled as ‘biographical narratives’ or ‘romanced biographies’ – illustrate a sort of crosscurrent within the wave of interbellum ‘authentic’ novel. However, his innovative action falls into the category of ‘vintage modernism’ (*‘modernism retro’*, in Paul Cernat’s theory), through his particular way of reviving both the melodramatic techniques and a particular type of melodrama pose and sensibility. The perusal of thousands of pages proved nothing more but the fact that, in his writer’s gown, Lovinescu is quite an appearance, a total stranger to the Romanian literary historians. This is, nevertheless, unfair, because his creative vocation (undermined by failure-dread) actualizes only the visible aspect – often mentioned as a casual occurrence, useful for comparison and contrast in the critic’s winning equation – of an odd psychological ‘case’, an instance of peculiarity, calling forth the ‘objective’ critic to explain it on and on.

We acknowledged the fact that Lovinescu grasped meanings (including of himself) to his convenience or, perhaps, to a bearable extent. At any rate, we cannot pretend to have learnt more about this matter. Yet, we have enriched and humanized the official version on the critic’s personality. Our virtual readers shall figure out the profit.

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