

*The Battle between the Aesthetic and
the Culturalist Perspective
in Studying Literature
(The Particular Case of the Romanian History
of Literature in the Recent Years)*

In 2008 Nicolae Manolescu, the most famous Romanian literary critic and historian of literature published his *Critical History of the Romanian Literature*, a monumental work of over 1500 pages. This work was eagerly awaited for different reasons. Manolescu is one of the central personalities of Romanian cultural life. He had an exceptional career as a literary critic, starting in *Contemporanul* in 1962 and ending in *România literară* in 1992. In three decades Manolescu “sailed” through the troubled waters of communism trying to make no compromise to the literary works that had no aesthetic value. After the Revolution, Manolescu has become the leader of the Civic Alliance Party, and a senator. In 1992 he was close to be nominated the candidate of the Democratic Convention for the presidency of Romania. A cultural personality before 1989, Manolescu has become a public personality after the Revolution. Nowadays, he is Romania’s ambassador at UNESCO. Manolescu’s public visibility explains, from the point of view the public, expectations for his history. The second reason for these high public expectations is the story of his *History* in itself. The first volume of the book was published in 1990, immediately after the Revolution. It analyzes the period of birth of the Romanian literature till the époque of the Grand Classics. So, all the interested public waited for the next volume. And the next volume was expected till 2008, when Manolescu decided to publish his entire history. The third reason of these expectations is connected to the prestige which literary histories have in Romania, in particular

The History of the Romanian Literature from the Beginning to Present by George Călinescu, published in 1941. George Călinescu was together with E. Lovinescu the referential critic for Romania between the two world wars. But the huge prestige of the critic was doubled by the fate of the book itself. Published in time of war, Călinescu's *History* became, during communism, a legend. Not re-edited till 1982, the book was, for example, viewed in our small group of pupils like the forbidden fruit. Our teacher of Romanian in the high school became all emotional when recalling the book. It was proper during communism to think of these forbidden or half forbidden books as if they contained deep, hidden, essential truths. Even when republished in the last decade of communism, the book maintained its aura. It was, as we felt it, a document of old beautiful times. Why those times were beautiful we heard from our grandparents but they were still mysterious. I think Călinescu's *History*'s enormous prestige also deepened the expectations for Manolescu's one. More than this, Nicolae Manolescu has been considered the symbolic inheritor of Călinescu. These are some of the reasons why *The Critical History of Romanian Literature* became not only the editorial event of 2008 but also a bestseller. It is worth mentioning that at the first presentation of the book at one of the two National Book Fairs, Paralela 45 publishing house sold 3,000 books in three days, starting to make lists with the name of the people who could not buy the book in order to send it by mail. Thinking of the prize, around 50 Euro and of the fact that it is, however, a book of history of literature, the success was really huge. I do not think that there is a book of any kind after the Revolution to have created such a stir.

After its publishing, *The Critical History of Romanian Literature* has become the object of a national debate in the written media, basically in the cultural magazines. The book has been highly appreciated but also harshly contested. The controversies are, when I write these pages, still vivid.

The end part of Manolescu's *History* is entitled *The Nostalgia of the Aesthetic* and it is representative of the essence of Manolescu's critical thinking. For Manolescu (2008: 1446), "The history of literature, based on the aesthetic critique, is the royal road of knowing ourselves, as moral and historical subjects." As can be seen both

from the title of its last chapter and also from this conclusion, Manolescu is a defender of the aesthetic critical perspective. To strengthen his standpoint, the author quotes Alain Bloom and Harold Bloom and two of their famous books: *The Closing of the American Mind* and *The Western Canon*. Proposing this conservative attitude when reading Romanian literature, Manolescu discovers and debates three forms of aggression against literary critique and history. “The first one is situated in the first hours of the Romanian communism, at the end of the 5th decade and in the entire 6th decade and is the expression of violating the literary facts by the Marxist-Leninist doctrine” (2008: 1447) The second aggression takes place “ten-fifteen years later from a certain scientific spirit which was against diachrony. Its expression was structuralism on the linguistic basis and the semiotic which developed for decades. (2008: 1448) Finally, the third aggression, on which I shall insist more is “the strongest one and it took place” after 1989, when everybody hoped for a definitive return of the critic and of the literary historian to his tools. (2008: 1450) The danger is, in this area, what Nicolae Manolescu calls “the Americanization” of Europe, and, of Romania as part of Europe. *The Nostalgia of the Aesthetic* connects the idea of “Americanization” with the changes in universities: “The disappearance from the university curriculum or the reduction of the number of classes of history of literature seemed to be a consequence of the lack of interest for reading of the pupils both in the secondary school and in the high school” (2008: 1452). Indeed, the number of classes of history of literature is lower in 2009 than in 1990 and the curriculum in the Romanian Faculties of Language and Literature was reduced being too extensive or because of economic reasons. More than this, the Romanian History of Literature is, together with the Romanian Contemporary Language the basic discipline of specialty in the curriculum. Another effect of what Manolescu calls “Americanization” is “a new concept of culture, generated by the universities, called cultural studies. It debates more contexts than texts, and when discusses texts, it makes unspecific observations and analyses regarding the sociology of the fictional world or to the psychology of its characters, to the political ideas of the author, to its feminist or sexist beliefs.” (2008: 1454) Is this “aggression” strong in Romania?

Is the aesthetic study of literature threatened by the presence of the cultural studies? Starting from the point of view of what is going on in the universities at the first level of learning, BA, we shall underline that, beginning with 2005, Cultural Studies is, like Language and Literatures, a separated field in the Humanist Sciences domain.¹ It is interesting to note that the domain includes Cultural Studies, American Studies, Judaic Studies but not Romanian Studies. At this level, no Romanian University has turned the programme of Romanian Language and Literature into Romanian Studies. More, there is no institutional wish to develop a license of B.A. in Romanian Studies. I started the paper talking about Nicolae Manolescu's prestige. His attitude, together with the one of another famous Romanian critic and literary historian, Eugen Simion, former president of the Romanian Academy, were very important for the stability of the study of Romanian. At this level, their ideas meet the points of view of the majority of the teachers of history of Romanian Literature in the country. Remaining at this institutional level, I want to make several remarks regarding the situation in the field of research in literature. There is a certain gap between the idea of aesthetic study of literature and the financed research for the universities. Even if they say that the fundamental research is encouraged, the large majority of financed programs are the ones that point out clearly the public usage of the results of the research. So, the research financed programmes our chair of Romanian at Transylvania University of Braşov won were all interdisciplinary projects, some of them set at the intersection of literature and the didactic of literature or being cultural studies like in the project which had as a result the book *Dea Munera*. In fact, the teacher of history of literature is now, like in one of the jokes with the bear and the rabbit, forced to take on more and more tasks, never being able to finish all of them.

Nicolae Manolescu's conservative vision is also a part of a polemic with Sorin Alexandrescu. Former professor in Amsterdam and a renowned specialist in the field of culture, Alexandrescu

¹ *The Humanist Science* fundamental domain includes, in a law from 2007, at different positions both *Languages and Literatures* in a two languages and literatures combination and *Cultural Studies*.

(1998) wrote in one of his books that: “the aesthetic canon will have a quick ending”. In the article dedicated to Alexandrescu in his history, Manolescu associates his ideas with the one of the two Romanian theoreticians of postmodernism, Ion Bogdan Lefter and Mircea Cărtărescu whose works advocate a plural canon (2008: 1451). Manolescu admits that the literary canon can be contested because it is “unique and exclusionist but not because it is aesthetic” (ib.). However, concludes the literary historian: “In literature, the canon, pluralist or not, cannot be but aesthetic” because “of the massive, strong, unforgiving attack which is caused by the disappearance of the criteria of value and of ranking, consequences of consumerism, of the “canon battle” of the American type and of the attempt to abolish the critical spirit” (2008: 1451).

Beyond this polemic dialogue in the Romanian culture I want to stress the idea that Manolescu’s reluctance to embrace changes in the field of studying literature had another strong argument. As a person who lived his life for a long time in communism, Manolescu is against any idea coming from the leftwing ideological landscape. Perceived as American liberal tendencies, concepts like “cultural studies” are also rejected for their political connotations. Manolescu is an elitist spirit and he perceives the cultural “Amercanization” as an enormous danger. As an argument we can use the objection the author makes regarding Sorin Alexanderescu’s point of view in discussing Manolescu’s book *Noah’s Ark* (Arca lui Noe). “My objection” is that Alexandrescu deals with my ideas using a “left”, “non-liberal” attitude, reminiscent more of “Zeletin and Bourdieu than of Popper and Hayek” (2008: 1246).

Instead of conclusions, I prefer to ask several questions: How can we explain in 2009 the success of any literary history? Is it only a matter of the Romanian cultural tradition? Are the aggressions named by Nicolae Manolescu real? Are the ideas of professor Manolescu old-fashioned? And if so, what new ideas do we have to protect our domain of study? What are our arguments to teach history of literature in the faculty? Does literature and particularly history of literature need protection, or can we trust the free market in this respect, too? How can we fill the gap between the study of literature and the more and more pragmatic way in which education

is seen? How can we make our scientific intentions, as literary historians, compatible with the objectives of the financed research?

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