

*Troubled Heritage. Monica Lovinescu and the Aesthetical Tradition in Romanian Literary Historiography*

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After December 1989, the Romanian literary field entered a troubled phase of revision that affected both its self-perception and sense of history. It then emerged from a long period of totalitarianism that had established its functioning as a permanently negotiated conflict between the political and the aesthetical principles. All of a sudden the ideological debates seemed superfluous precisely because they had been constitutive of this semi-autonomous field; and a long and difficult process of reconsidering the literary past began. This triggered an expansion towards the literary production of the Romanian exile, an impressive revaluation of autobiographical literature (diaries, memoirs of interwar intellectuals, prison literature, a.s.o.), and consequently a critical revisiting of the literary canon. One major effect of this broadening of the scope and stakes of Romanian literature has been the accessibility (if not the proper assessment) of Monica Lovinescu's critical work for the Romanian literary public.

Monica Lovinescu (1923-2008), the daughter of the modernist literary critic and historian Eugen Lovinescu, had left Romania in 1947 to settle in Paris, where she joined the circle of exile intellectuals in opposition to the communist regime. Since 1962 she had become an editor of Radio Free Europe in Paris, for which she produced the weekly broadcasts "Teze și antiteze la Paris" [Theses and antitheses in Paris] and then "Actualitatea culturală românească" [Romanian cultural news], from 1967 on. Most of her radio chronicles, that had a huge impact in the Romanian literary field for almost 3 decades, came out in the '90s (1990-1996) by Humanitas Publishing, in 6 volumes. Although her essential contribution to the functioning of the critical and democratic spirit in the Romanian literary field during communism had been repeatedly underlined by the most important critics and historians after 1989, her work has not yet been thoroughly analyzed with respect not only to her literary and public influence, but also to her theoretical principles and bearings. Since the 'trademark' of her critical activity had always been the direct reaction to the most recent position takings in the literary field, a contextualizing of her work seems all the more necessary and relevant.

The present paper endeavors such an analysis of her place within the Romanian historiographical tradition represented by such personalities as E. Lovinescu and G. Călinescu. I will be focusing on the historiographical, and not just the critical tradition (though the two discourses are interrelated, especially during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century) because the most relevant stake in Monica Lovinescu's battles is the survival of the interwar tradition and its rituals of normality; also because, while writing and performing her chronicles for Radio Free Europe, she is acting in the historical-literary field in a direct manner, by influencing opinions and prompting attitudes from various groups that were engaged in the aesthetical-ideological debates of the time.

The reception of Monica Lovinescu's literary critical work after 1989 generally emphasized her ethical stance and her 'outsidedness' to the Romanian literary field (both valued either positively or negatively). Thus several histories of Romanian literature that came out after 2000 evaluate her critical action as a form of direct and effective reaction to the developments under way in her home country, from the 1960s on. Alex Ștefănescu<sup>1</sup> compares her role in establishing literary and ethical hierarchies to that of a supreme court of justice, as she was highly respected in the avant-garde circles.

For Nicolae Manolescu<sup>2</sup>, her friend and fellow militant for literary autonomy, her criticism is to be placed in an almost transcendental perspective ("All of us had listened to her as to a sacred voice..."<sup>3</sup>; "a literary columnist that became a living legend"<sup>4</sup>). Yet the following lines of the chapter dedicated to Monica Lovinescu in his *Critical History of Romanian Literature* take a certain distance since Manolescu considers the ethical turn as decisive in her literary judgments. These judgments function complementarily to those expressed by the critics who actually lived in Romania during communism: Monica Lovinescu's analyses deal especially with the content of the literary works and with the socio-political context, "paying less attention to the artistic level"<sup>5</sup>. Though highly appreciative, Manolescu's tone becomes ambiguous as he

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<sup>1</sup> Alex Ștefănescu, *History of Contemporary Romanian Literature, 1941-2000*. Bucharest: Mașina de scris, 2005, p. 697 (in Romanian in original: *Istoria literaturii române contemporane*). Unless otherwise specified, the translations from Romanian are mine.

<sup>2</sup> Nicolae Manolescu, *A Critical History of Romanian Literature. 5 Centuries of Literature*. Pitești: Paralela 45, 2008 (in Romanian in original: *Istoria critică a literaturii române*).

<sup>3</sup> "Noi toți am ascultat-o cu sfințenie" (in Romanian in original). Ibid., p. 1206.

<sup>4</sup> "un cronicar literar devenit legendă vie" (in Romanian in original). Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> "acordând o mai mică atenție artisticului" (in Romanian in original). Ibid., p. 1209.

underlines her moral stance and the documentary value of her criticism. He makes recourse to the long-employed metaphor of the mirror that points to a realistic method and vision not quite prized by the author of *Noah's Ark*<sup>6</sup> (where the category of the Doric applies to the first and most unrefined stage of novelistic technique): “We look into her books as if they were a mirror that does not always reflect us as we wish, or we fancy ourselves; yet from this image, that reaches us from afar, confronted with our dramatic personal experience, we learn to know ourselves better.”<sup>7</sup>

Though unfair, trivial, and failing to recognize the sense of her criticism, Marian Popa, a left-wing ideological adversary of Monica Lovinescu's, comments upon the same dominant principles in her chronicles: the ethical criterion and the militant stance<sup>8</sup>.

From a different (ideological) perspective, Cornel Ungureanu, one of the first literary historians to study the phenomenon of the exile in its connections with the literary culture in the home country, praised her involvement in the political battles of the literary field, but adds that “precisely this involvement sacrifices, in some cases, the aesthetic truth of the literary work. Or brackets it.”<sup>9</sup>

Her position in the literary field seems thus to be distanced from both the avant-garde, aesthetical pole, and the ideological, party-controlled one. The advantages of such a position are certain, if one thinks of Starobinski's theory of critical reading<sup>10</sup>, or, more recently, of Franco Moretti's concept of ‘distant reading.’<sup>11</sup> Monica Lovinescu herself comments on this/ her view in a chronicle from the third volume of

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<sup>6</sup> Nicolae Manolescu, *Arca lui Noe. Eseu despre romanul românesc*. Bucharest : 1001 Gramar, 1998 (in Romanian in original).

<sup>7</sup> Nicolae Manolescu, *A Critical History of Romanian Literature. 5 Centuries of Literature*. Pitești: Paralela 45, 2008, pp. 1210-11 (in Romanian in original: “Ne privim în ele [cărțile ei] ca într-o oglindă, care nu ne arată totdeauna nici cum am dori, nici cum ne închipuim, dar din această imagine, care ne vine de departe, confruntată cu dramatica noastră experiență personală, învățăm să ne cunoaștem mai bine.”)

<sup>8</sup> Marian Popa, *History of Romanian Literature From Today to Tomorrow*. Bucharest : Semne, 2009. Vol. II, pp. 1055-1057 (in Romanian in original: *Istoria literaturii române de azi pe mâine*).

<sup>9</sup> Cornel Ungureanu, *West of Eden. An Introduction to Exile Literature* [La Vest de Eden. O introducere în literatura exilului]. Timișoara: Amarcord, 1995, p. 173 (in Romanian in original: “tocmai această implicare sacrificială, în unele cazuri, adevărul estetic al operei. Sau îl așază în paranteze.”).

<sup>10</sup> See, for instance, Jean Starobinski, *La Relation critique*. Paris: Gallimard, 1970.

<sup>11</sup> As illustrated by Moretti's *Graphs, Maps, Trees. Abstract Models for Literary History*. London & New York: Verso, 2005.

*Short Waves*: the foreigner's perspective is part of a *contemporary posterity* (also the title of this volume) that explains the failure of Romanian epic literature (with very few exceptions) to stir the interest of the Western reader. This failure is due to the mistaken belief that aesthetic value as such could guarantee literary success, and not the actual circumstances related to context and reception (6 March 1981)<sup>12</sup>. Yet one major disadvantage, in a historical perspective, is that such a position (and such an actor in the literary field) has little chances of being appropriated and truly integrated in the intellectual conversation.

The idea that her chronicles represented an alternative both to the official literary ideology and to the aesthetic principles that were structuring the Romanian literary criticism of the time is emphasized by Gheorghe Grigurcu in the entry on Monica Lovinescu for *The Dictionary of Romanian Writers*<sup>13</sup>. Grigurcu defends her position against the biased critics and ideologists that, supporting the official party propaganda, accused Monica Lovinescu of stepping aside the aesthetical tradition (thus the argument of the autonomous pole in the field was being turned against her). This blame is perversely constructed since it also implied a denial of the father figure from her part, a refusal of his heritage (expressed by such canonical texts as *Titu Maiorescu and His Critical Posterity* from 1943, or the volume on "Evolution of literary criticism", part of his *History of Contemporary Romanian Literature, 1926-1929*).<sup>14</sup> Her politicized ethos was actually masking the same aesthetic principle, comments Grigurcu in his attempt to reconcile Monica Lovinescu with the 'good' critics in the country (who practiced, as he admits, only a moderate courage and told partial truths). His reading situates Monica Lovinescu in Maiorescu's line, setting the direction for a literature who had long lost its course: "M. Lovinescu authoritatively illustrates the present stage in the history of the aesthetic, under unprecedented, dangerous circumstances. It is the stage of its ethical conscience. This is a natural evolution of the idea of the aesthetical autonomy in a new context, in which the threats originate both from the outside, and on its own surroundings."<sup>15</sup> Tempting as it

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<sup>12</sup> Monica Lovinescu, *Unde scurte*. Bucharest: Humanitas, 1990-1996, 6 vols. (in Romanian in original).

<sup>13</sup> Mircea Zăciu, Marian Papahagi, Aurel Sasu (coordinated by), *Dicționarul scriitorilor români*. Bucharest: Romanian Cultural Foundation, 1998. Vol II : D-L, pp. 764-8 (in Romanian in original).

<sup>14</sup> E. Lovinescu, *Titu Maiorescu și posteritatea lui critică*. Bucharest : Casa Școalelor, 1943 ; idem, "Evoluția criticii literare", in *Istoria literaturii române contemporane*. Bucharest: Minerva, 1981, vol I. (in Romanian in original).

<sup>15</sup> Gh. Grigurcu in Zăciu et al., *op. cit.*, pp. 767-8 (in Romanian in original: „M. Lovinescu ilustrează cu prestanță stadiul actual, de conștiință etică, luptătoare, al

may be to reinsert her criticism in the ‘right’ tradition, one has to be careful not to misinterpret in this process certain key passages in her chronicles that reveal a slightly, but significantly different view. Even Grigurcu, one of the keenest commentators of her work, reduced the singularity of such a stance by calling it ‘alternative’ with no further determinations.

I propose then to look into some of Monica Lovinescu’s position takings regarding her relation with this aesthetical tradition and her analytical criteria.

The direct references to E. Lovinescu and G. Călinescu in her critical work and also in her diaries are scarce. As the reader advances on the temporal line, they become even scarcer. Certainly there are different reasons for this reluctance: discretion, a good education, and/ or the will to make her own way would explain her refusal to write about the father; while Călinescu, who had been her teacher at the university, is regarded partly with admiration for his work published before World War II, partly with disappointment for his ethical compromise after that. (The differences and disputes between the two critics must have played a part as well.) She places Călinescu in the interwar literary field, when he gave his major contribution to Romanian literary criticism and historiography. Several times she deplores the fact that his impressive *History* was not reprinted; this should happen not in order to refuel the cult around Călinescu (the exaggerations of which she ironically signaled), but because it is a scandal that the work of one of the most original writers in our literature<sup>16</sup> is not actually read by the general public. Anyway both of them (though one more than the other) are representative for a literary epoch characterized by normality and civility, an epoch which Monica Lovinescu regards with profound nostalgia being at the same time acutely conscious of its break with the present.

The most valuable feature of the literary tradition that started with Titu Maiorescu and included (in E. Lovinescu’s account) both E. Lovinescu and G. Călinescu is the prevalence of the aesthetical criterion in the critical judgment. This criterion was part of a constellation of professional options that included the impressionistic style in the footsteps of Anatole France, Jules Lemaître or Émile Faguet, the

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esteticului, supus unor primejdii fără precedent. E vorba de evoluția firească a ideii autonomiei esteticului într-un context nou, în care pericolele apar atât din afară, cât și pe propriul teritoriu.”)

<sup>16</sup> As she calls him in *Short Waves* vol. II, p. 103.

preference for the chronicle genre in criticism, and the encyclopedic view on literary history.

From all these, Monica Lovinescu seems to have prized only the form of the short essay (literary chronicle). Surely this choice can also be explained by the constraints of the radio broadcasting. M. Lovinescu's critical essays were written in order to be read and listened, not to be published (before 1989, a small selection of them was published by an exile press in Madrid, in 1978, with very limited circulation). To be concerned with her published work must have seemed preposterous to M. Lovinescu at that time; she sounded a note of despair and bitter irony when writing on the writer's compromise for the sake of the work: "should I ask myself why this scene, and also Anna Ahmatova's *Requiem*, and Nadejda Mandelstam's memoirs come to my mind every time I hear that a writer or another in Romania explains his ethical demise, concessions, or even his homage to the Court by the necessity to see his work published – the only thing that matters?"<sup>17</sup>. If her criticism is important as part of Romanian literary history under the communist regime, it is so due to its documentary value *and* also through the critic's involvement in the field as producer of literary history. I am referring here mostly to the institutional history of literature, to the representation of the various positions and trajectory changes that dynamize the literary life of a period, according to Pierre Bourdieu's theory<sup>18</sup>. The critic as historian pays attention to the emergence of new trends, to the signs of involution of a certain manner, etc. This attention does not for a moment lose sight of the ethical or political implications of such phenomena. And this institutional history is not unrelated to the immanent, 'aesthetical' history of the evolution of forms, genres, etc.

The similarities with the interwar masters in terms of style or literary manner are obvious but superficial. Monica Lovinescu has the ability to select the dominant quality of a literary work or a writer, the so-called *qualité maîtresse* valued by the impressionist critics: Mihai Beniuc incarnates the type of the police informer<sup>19</sup> ("watchdog and auxiliary of the *Securitate*"); "Marin Preda's *The Great Loner* is the first serious

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<sup>17</sup> Monica Lovinescu, *op. cit.*, vol. III, p. 194 (in Romanian in original: "să mă mai întreb de ce scena aceasta, ca și *Requiemul* Annei Ahmatova, ca și paginile de memorii ale Nadejdei Mandelștam îmi revin în minte ori de câte ori aud un scriitor sau altul din România explicându-și demisiile, concesiile sau chiar laudele aduse la Curte prin necesitatea de a-și vedea opera – singura ce contează – publicată?").

<sup>18</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Les Règles de l'art. Genèse et structure du champ littéraire*. Paris: Seuil, 1992.

<sup>19</sup> M. Lovinescu, *op. cit.*, vol. I, p. 41 (in Romanian in original: "câine de pază și auxiliar al securității").

attempt to give us a book of the Son”<sup>20</sup>; Adrian Păunescu is *the court poet*, a.s.o. More important than these qualities of her writing that recall the vivid style of her forerunners is the feeling of the urgency of action in favour of a dissident writer, or of a protest of the Writers’ Union, or the reevaluation of a classic or modern writer. Monica Lovinescu embraces the causes that are generally ignored, from one reason or another, by her colleagues in Romania (Paul Goma, Dorin Tudoran, to mention only two examples).

Although many chronicles are dedicated to the reception of past writers, or to the intellectual developments in the countries from the Eastern Bloc, or to the latest trends in philosophy, theatre, cinema, or other aspect of the French cultural life, Monica Lovinescu’s focus definitely remains on contemporary Romanian literature. This engagement presupposes a strong concern for the ideological battles taking place in the present; a concern that she shares with her father, yet under different political conditions (the period between the 1960s and the late 1980s had marked a strong return of the heteronymous influences on art and literature). So she cannot offer just an analysis of literary forms, but has to reveal the distorted functions of these forms. A hermeneutical reading has to be applied to the mechanisms of literary policies, to gestures and attitudes that have the power of modifying the ‘normal’ course of literary evolution. For instance, several important essays in *Short Waves I* lucidly represent and explain the state of the literary field on the verge of liberalization (1961-1964): the rhetoric of commemorations, the reevaluation and reprinting of the modernist writers, the practice of exporting only convenient bits and pieces of contemporary literature in carefully planned anthologies, a.s.o. Beyond the official propaganda bracketing the Mangalia party gathering in 3 August 1983, M. Lovinescu reads the signs of a systematic threat for Romanian culture (see *Short Waves IV*, 23-30 September 1983). And the examples are countless.

An important theme of the *Short Waves* is that of the disease affecting Romanian literature and culture in general. One symptom of this is the proliferation of celebrations (“the chronic feastilitis”<sup>21</sup>). The wannabe realistic literature published in Romania is nothing more than “a sneeze instead of an agony”<sup>22</sup>. Before the crucial Writers’ National Conference

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<sup>20</sup> M. Lovinescu, *op. cit.*, vol. II, p. 17 (in Romanian in original: “*Marele singuratic* de Marin Preda reprezintă prima încercare serioasă de a ne da o carte a Fiului”).

<sup>21</sup> Idem, vol. III, p. 19 (in Romanian in original: „sărbătorita cronică”).

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 31 (in Romanian in original: „un strănut în locul unei agonii”).

in 1981 she practiced a “radioscopy of the Writers’ Union structures”<sup>23</sup>. This medical imaginary constructs the image of a literary field that functions as a sick, alienated organism. Its disease is generated by “the constant relativization of the notions of good and evil” as she notes in the foreword to the third volume.<sup>24</sup> In order to efficiently react to this, Monica Lovinescu makes no use of the aesthetical autonomy principle (the flag raised by the Romanian critics and writers to justify their lack of reaction or diverse forms of compromise). Instead she insists on the necessary ethical stance to be taken. When distinguishing between the two points of view, the tactical one and the truth<sup>25</sup>, or in the famous parable of the two inks, one used for ‘pure’ literature, the other for the newspaper article<sup>26</sup>, M. Lovinescu implicitly pleads for the higher adequacy of the ethical criterion in judging a literature that is no longer autonomous. The ethical is not just a detour for the aesthetical, but a standard as such that incorporates critical objectivity (as with E. Lovinescu) and goes beyond it, to the issue of the responsibility of the writer as an individual and as part of a collective body.

Such a critic has little reason for optimism: “My first reaction to the congress logocracy was no comment. Yet one of the major dangers of ideological language – in its unfortunate repetition pattern – lies precisely in this consternated resignation. To become indifferent to this ideological language, and let it speak for itself. It’s just at this point that this language starts talking in us, separating us from the real. This is why I finally reacted.”<sup>27</sup> When she celebrates a writer, the motivation is complex and expressed from the prophetic distance of the future hierarchies; quoting from N. Steinhardt (“Courage is no less necessary

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 180.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 6. See also Eugen Negrici’s comment: “The literature that has developed under a totalitarian government could only be pictured as a field of stylistic anomalies, with sick growths, insidious formations, strange multiplications, vicious deformities, defensive conrescences” (*Iluziile literaturii române*. Bucharest: Cartea Românească, 2008, p. 51; in Romanian in original: „Literatura dezvoltată sub guvernare totalitară nu ar putea fi închipuită decât ca un soi de teren al anomaliilor stilistice, cu excrescențe, formațiuni insidioase, multiplicări stranii, deformări vicioase, conrescențe defensive.”)

<sup>25</sup> In *Short Waves I*, ed. cit., p. 144.

<sup>26</sup> Idem, vol. III, p. 340.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., pp. 324-5; in Romanian in original: “Prima reacție la logocrația de la congres a fost să nici n-o mai comentăm. Însă una din primejdiile majore ale limbajului ideologic – în repetitivitatea sa nefastă – stă tocmai în resemnarea consternată. (...) Pur și simplu să devenim indiferenți la limbajul ideologic, lăsându-l să vorbească singur. Numai că atunci limbajul acesta ne vorbește pe noi, separându-ne de real. Iată de ce am reacționat totuși.”

for a writer that his talent”<sup>28</sup>), she comments: “Romanian literature should recognize in N. Steinhardt one of its so rare therapists that redeem demises, compromises, stains, through a kind of gesture that is almost sacrificial.”<sup>29</sup>

In her writings, Monica Lovinescu provided the Romanian readership with a complex and agonistic representation of the literary field, otherwise threatened by a certain uniformity (albeit constructed in a polarized, dichotomic manner by the autochthonous literary historical narratives). Her fidelity for the ethical principle, while not excluding the intrinsic evaluation criterion of the literary field (often used as an excuse for the lack of the former by Romania-based critics), opens the perspective for the existence of an ethical canon<sup>30</sup>, all the more necessary in our post-communist context.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., pp. 344-5; in Romanian in original: “Curajul (...) – nu-i mai puțin absolut necesar scriitorului decât talentul.”

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 346; in Romanian in original: „literatura română ar trebui să recunoască în N. Steinhardt pe unul dintre acei (atît de rari) terapeuți răscumpărînd, într-un fel de gest aproape sacrificial, demisii, compromisuri, pete.”

<sup>30</sup> Discussed by Sorin Alexandrescu in *Privind înapoi, modernitatea* (Bucharest: Univers, 1999), yet with a different focus.

<sup>31</sup> Camelia Crăciun writes that M. Lovinescu, “in her weekly columns also constructed a new cultural and moral canon” (“Monica Lovinescu at Radio Free Europe”, in John Neubauer, Borbála Zsuzsanna (eds.), *The Exile and Return of Writers from East-Central Europe: A Compendium*, Walter de Gruyter, 2009, p. 288).

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#### Abstract

*Troubled Heritage. Monica Lovinescu and the Aesthetical Tradition in Romanian Literary Historiography.* This paper briefly analyzes Monica Lovinescu’s literary criticism in the context of the Romanian critical and historiographical tradition represented by such personalities as E. Lovinescu and G. Călinescu. It looks into some of her position takings regarding the configuration of the literary field and the status of the aesthetical criterion in the Romanian criticism of the 1960s- late 1980s. The analysis concludes with the foregrounding of the ethical principle, emphasized by the Romanian critic in exile as an essential requirement for a writer working in a totalitarian regime.

Keywords: Monica Lovinescu, criticism, literary history, tradition, literary field, communism, aesthetical criterion, ethic value

#### Rezumat

*Troubled Heritage. Monica Lovinescu and the Aesthetical Tradition in Romanian Literary Historiography.* Articolul de față analizează în linii

mari critica literară a Monicăi Lovinescu în contextul tradiției critice și istoriografice românești, reprezentate de personalități ca E. Lovinescu și G. Călinescu. Articolul examinează câteva luări de poziție ale Monicăi Lovinescu privind configurația câmpului literar și statutul criteriului estetic în critica românească a anilor 1960-1980. Analiza se încheie cu relevarea principiului etic, considerat de criticul român în exil ca fiind esențial pentru un scriitor în condițiile unui regim totalitar.

Cuvinte-cheie: Monica Lovinescu, critică literară, istorie literară, tradiție, câmp literar, comunism, criteriu estetic, valoare etică