

AMBIVALENCES OF A TOUR DE FORCE: ISTORIA LITERATURII ROMÂNE CONTEMPORANE AS CRITIQUE AND AS LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT. *Ambivalences of a Tour de Force: Istoria Literaturii Române Contemporane as Critique and as Literature.* This essay starts from hypothesizing a double dimension of Mihai Iovănel's *History*: critical *and* literary (or, as Matei says, poetic). The idea of such an interpretation is given by Iovănel's quoting a late text by Louis Althusser, in which the French philosopher defines the figure of an "aleatory materialist," as opposed to a "dialectical" materialist. While critics have already discussed the critical dimension of Iovănel's project, an aspect Matei also examines in the last part of his contribution, less has been said, he maintains, about the *History* as a literary project, as "writing." Matei thus attends to the qualities and shortcomings of Iovănel's project, which stem, he claims, from the aforementioned double dimension of the *History*.

Keywords: *Mihai Iovănel, poetics of literary history, aleatory materialism, contemporary Romanian literature*

REZUMAT. *Ambivalențele unui tour de force: Istoria literaturii române contemporane, proiect critic și proiect literar.* Eseul de față pornește de la ipoteza că *Istoria literaturii române contemporane* a lui Mihai Iovănel are o

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dublă dimensiune: una critică și una literară (poetică). Ideea unei astfel de interpretări își are originea într-un citat dintr-un text târziu al lui Louis Althusser, în care filosoful francez distinge între un “materialist aleatoriu” și un materialist “dialectic,” care apare în Prefața cărții. Dimensiunea critică a proiectului lui Iovănel a fost deja discutată într-o serie de articole și mă ocup de aceasta în ultima parte a acestui eseu. Despre dimensiunea literară a proiectului său s-a vorbit mai puțin. Aș dori să evaluez, dintr-un punct de vedere mărturisit marginal, calitățile și defectele *Istoriei* în măsura în care acestea rezultă din articularea celor două dimensiuni amintite.

Cuvinte-cheie: *Mihai Iovănel, poetica istoriei literare, materialism aleatoriu, literatura română contemporană*

Mihai Iovănel’s *History of Contemporary Romanian Literature* attempts to name, for almost any kind of reader (Romanian or foreign), a UFO, as it were. Whereas the title itself is familiar in Romania,—harking back, along with the book’s actual project, to Eugen Lovinescu,— what a reader of other literary histories published in Romanian discovers in Iovănel’s book turns out to be less so. First of all, this is not merely a history “of literature” but, in the first two parts, what in France might appear under titles such as *Le Saga des intellectuels français* (Dosse 2018) or *La Décennie* (Cusset 2006): cultural-intellectual histories/cultural studies. The opening parts, then, are followed by what does count as a history of Romanian literature, in parts 3-4. Finally, Part 5, if extended, could constitute a project in its own right: “The Transnational Specificity.” All in all, Iovănel’s volume is spectacular in its accomplishments. The *History* therefore comprises at least three books. They coexist between the same covers for at least two reasons. First, because no one has written such books for decades, and there was no chance that anyone would, because the shrinking and de-professionalized local non-fiction publishing market does not seem to encourage such an enterprise. Compared to the 1960s and 1990s, the publishing market’s relationship to books has become conformist and utilitarian: bookstores sell you a lot of gadgets before you get to books, and books have become objects of leisure and mindfulness agents, trinkets to be given as gifts, ether concentrates that you buy at Cărturești like you buy perfume at Séphora. From this point of view, Iovănel’s *History* takes on a composite project that resembles the mission of the coach of a shabby football team. Knowing that he can only count on six players instead of eleven, the coach will assign double tasks: firstly, Mihai Iovănel acts as a sociologist, cultural historian, critic and literary historian. Second, we are of course talking about a personal commitment—as part of a

group—to a project concerning literary politics that is extremely necessary, but whose effects must be today recalculated, in terms of the social value of literature, which has been declining over the last two decades.

The stakes of this essay lie in assessing the ambivalences of this major intellectual undertaking in contemporary Romanian culture, from two perspectives: that of a literary project (of writing) and that of a critical project (on an ideological level). The two parts are not, however, equal, because what seems obvious to me is the preeminence of the ideological over the poetic. However, the latter cannot be absent. I would say that not leaving it out only enhances fidelity to the author's declared materialism. And the starting point is precisely the excerpt from Althusser as the author's ideological and scriptural, in other words personal intellectual and personal affective, driving force.

Before proceeding, I would like to add a few words about the place from which I am going to write this text, as opened to me by Iovănel's work. One of the most important reflexive concepts I have encountered lately is Donna Haraway's "situated knowledge," according to which situated and embodied knowledge is "an argument against various forms of unlocatable, and therefore irresponsible, knowledge claims" (Haraway 1988, 583). It is through the prism of this concept that I would like to write about the ambivalences of Iovănel's *History*; I would call them ambivalences rather than contradictions, perhaps because the latter term rationalizes ambivalence, specifies it but also reduces it. From the same point of view of situated knowledge, I believe that my position towards this project/manifesto can be neither neutral nor central. I am not a specialist in Romanian literature, and I have no interest in defending the project of the generation of the 80s over the one of the next generation (of the 2000s). Neither Nicolae Manolescu nor Eugen Simion have trained me. You can live unperturbed in Romania—today, at least—without feeling encumbered by pleas for the autonomy of the aesthetic, even if you deal, in a broad sense, with literature and cultural theories. That is why I do not think what I am writing here will be very interesting for what we could call, reductively, "camps." The fact that this *History* has now shaped such camps, that a lasting coldness now seems to have set in between representatives of two literary groups that have recently brought together the first two volumes of a large editorial project coordinated by Christian Moraru and Andrei Terian, cannot go unnoticed. Iovănel's *History* has, first and foremost, a strategic value on a literary front populated by an ever smaller and poorer army – which, however, has not died, has not deserted—and which cannot, from one day to the next, reabsorb all its complexes, especially now that the marketplace of ideas has become transnational and when those who read only in Romanian, and especially those who do not read in English, are condemned to isolation. If Iovănel has constructed a product for domestic use, he has also tried to construct an image of "the West"

that is different both from the one conveyed by all sorts of “nativists,” who see the West as decadent, and from the conservative one of a white, old, possibly Christian, world cultural centre, without which the very idea of a centre loses its content. This West is itself ambivalent: it tends to identify itself with ‘the world’, with the planet—in the idea of a cultural democracy in which the hierarchy of cultures is a discourse of power that is nowadays denounced—but it nevertheless remains embodied in objects such as a book published in English by an international prestigious publisher. Without going into details, it is at least worth mentioning a problem that this *History* raises, both explicitly (Iovănel 2021, 162) and especially implicitly: that of (self-)colonization. I agree that ideas and discourses circulate; that the fear of contamination is irrational. The diffusion of forms created at the centre to the periphery is not, however, a process in which the centre is active and the periphery passive, but a process in which centres and peripheries enter into an agentive negotiation that can take all sorts of forms—some of which can be called self-colonization, for example the acculturation of Atatürk’s Turkey in the 1930s and 1940s. What can underpin a theory of anticolonization may be, for example, the rhythm. The rhythm of change can be faster or slower, but what might be called social arrhythmias can occur, such as the Stalinist period in Romania, when one could feel ‘taken over’: in this case we are talking about violence, with the boomerang effect we know all too well.

Iovănel as an “Aleatory” Materialist

On page 12 of his *History*, Iovănel declares that he is inspired by—and probably identifies with—Louis Althusser’s portrait of the materialist philosopher, written in the summer of 1986: “The materialist philosopher is a man who always catches a moving train, like the hero in American westerns. (...) This philosopher knows neither the Origin, nor the First Principle, nor the destination. (...) In short, he records sequences of random encounters, not, like the idealist philosopher, consequences deduced from an origin on which all Meaning is founded, or from an Initial Principle or absolute Cause.”²

This is not, however, any materialism, but an aleatory one, in which our character witnesses atoms of the real about which we do not know where they come from and where they go. Contingents. The portrait in question, from which

² Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own. The original Romanian reads: “Filozoful materialist este un ins care întotdeauna prinde un tren aflat în mișcare, precum eroul din westernurile americane (...). Acest filozof nu cunoaște nici Originea, nici Primul Principiu, nici destinația (...). Pe scurt, el înregistrează secvențe ale unor întâlniri aleatorii, nu, precum filozoful idealist, consecuții deduse dintr-o origine pe care se întemeiază întreaga Semnificație, sau dintr-un Princiăiu Inițial sau Cauză absolute” (Iovănel 2021, 12).

Iovănel extracts a fragment translated from English, coagulates narratively, and the first piece of information about the character is this: “The essential thing is that he [the materialist philosopher] does not know where he is and wants to go somewhere” (Althusser 1994, 581—our translation from original French). Althusser’s character is not disembodied: we learn that his name is Nikos, that he is Greek, that he has emigrated to the United States, that he accepts the first job offered to him and that he slowly succeeds in self-accomplishment: the most beautiful wife and the most beautiful animals are his—“after ten years of work.” Althusser, who writes his last texts in a psychiatric hospital, compares his character to Gorbachev walking through the streets of Moscow. Towards the end, he adds, “He thus unwittingly becomes a quasi-professional materialist philosopher—but not a *dialectical* materialist, that horror, but an aleatory materialist.” (Althusser 1994, 582—author’s emphasis). Althusser, in these last years of his life after Hélène’s murder, writes little and, above all, looks at the world from an exiled man’s perspective—he is acquitted, but the anathema remains, the former ENS professor no longer has any power. Aleatory materialism—or, with another formula of his own, the “materialism of the encounter”—is an equally late invention, of which some dozens of pages remain where the author returns to the pre-Socratic beginnings of materialism, in a free essay that seems to anticipate something of Meillassoux’s discourse of speculative realism. Philosophy, Althusser writes, becomes “the statement of the subjection of necessity to contingency,” and is a “finding,” without determinations, without origin and without great questions (1994, 542).

Even if this filiation claimed by Iovănel remains an authorial vignette—a spectacular one, which is why I have chosen to take it up and give it context—it points to something I would not want to overlook: the fact that we are dealing with a project that is at once intellectual and literary, institutional and aesthetic, ideological and affective, that attempts, in Promethean fashion, to build a composite object, unheard of in any editorial framework—Romanian and foreign—a kind of hypermarket you go to, as it happens, on a Friday evening, to buy what you no longer have at home, but where, once you arrive, you find something to eat, to go window-shopping for, to see what the market trends are, and from where you return, obviously, with much more than you imagined you were going to buy.

Therefore, I think I am not wrong if I confess that the first impression when reading this *magnum opus* is one of stamina, but also of a sort of autogenic chaos, magically ordered under the federative title of “history of contemporary Romanian literature.” The author is himself aware of the magnitude of the result, but also of the likelihood that the effects—i.e. the manifested reality—have surpassed his initial intentions. It is precisely from this point of view that

I welcome Christian Moraru's "transformative" interpretation in the opening of his own article on Iovănel's history (Moraru 2021, 2). I would add, to this perspective, the concept of the "global" used by Christie McDonald and Susan Rubin Suleiman in their work on French literature, entitled *French Global. A New Approach to Literary History* (McDonald and Suleiman 2010). Thus, for the two scholars, "global" does not mean exhaustive, totalizing, universalizing: "For us, the definition of global is more like that of a global positioning system (to cite the *OED* a last time): "a world-wide navigation system which allows users to determine their location very precisely by means of receiving equipment that detects timed radio signals from a network of satellites in stable, predictable orbits." The satellites move in stable and predictable orbits, but the GPS device itself accompanies people who move around a great deal, often in haphazard, unpredictable trajectories. One of the best things about a GPS device is its constant ability and willingness to 'recalculate'" (McDonald and Suleiman 2010, X). Iovănel attempts the impossible: rewriting Lovinescu after Deleuze, but also after Marx, in an attempt to foresee any readerly perspective. He would like his *History* to be read and above all *recognized* by Manolescu as well as by Ferencz-Flatz.

Iovănel as a Writer

Iovănel's story deserves to be read as an author's essay, at least to the same extent that it should be read as (a kind of) "history." Its first statement has echoes of Rousseau: "This book is the first history of post-communist Romanian literature": an observation and a statement. Along the way, it alternates spontaneous and reflective passages, in a way that pleases and annoys at the same time. It pleases, because Iovănel writes well, vividly, if at times overly synthetic (he wants to miss as few of Althusser's trains as possible and conjure up as much arbitrariness as possible). It annoys, on the other hand, because the *History* is not only not a didactic or Olympian text, but the effort of balanced expression is sometimes abandoned for a freedom that only a maternal language would allow. Here I would point out the page dedicated to Paul Cernat: the portrait's tones are at least malicious. Although Cernat has sometimes come dangerously close to Eugen Simion, for reasons not necessarily related to any ideological affinity, I do not believe the validity of a lineage/filiation between the two critics. Nor do I believe that Cernat is a conservative—undercover or not.

On the poetic dimension of the *History*, an essential methodological presupposition concerns the genesis of Iovănel's cultural-historical project: why should a History of Literature (which is supposed to assemble more data than a single narrative can) be the work, the product of a single author? Would

that not undermine its intellectual, epistemological and even ideological value? An implicit answer appears at the beginning of chapter 6, "Tools, directions, authors," where the author talks about the virtues of the *General Dictionary of Romanian Literature* he worked on and the advantages of a literary dictionary in general over single-author histories. It is the moment of a polemic with Nicolae Manolescu who, in line with his long-professed anti-positivism, considers the critical charisma that a dictionary can assume in relation to a single-author history insufficient. Iovănel contradicts him, and he is right to do so: "Much more up-to-date are multi-authored histories, whose diversity (...) offers a plural, more open and more democratic perspective on the subject" (Iovănel 2021, 179). But the self-irony is patent precisely because the statement itself belongs to a single author of one literary history. It is as if I, who stutter, were to declare that it is necessarily good for those afflicted with logoneurosis to teach. It is worth mentioning here that this meta-irony was nevertheless thematized by one of the critics of Iovănel's work. Ștefan Baghiu, in a subtle gesture in which he takes up the main criticisms that could or have been levelled at the *History*, in order to defuse them, justifies this type of project: "The idea is circulating that today literary histories are written by groups of authors rather than by single authors. But the reality *on the ground* is different: there is no history of post-war Romanian literature written by a collective. (...) So, in short, to say that it is strange to have a history of contemporary Romanian literature written by a single author in an era when literary research is done by collectives of authors is to assume that some collectives of authors are working on such histories" (Baghiu 2021, 84). It would not necessarily be important to note that such a project exists (even if it is not finished – that of the history of Romanian literature conceived within the Romanian Academy in the 1960s and 1970s, of which three volumes have appeared), but the argument of "the reality on the ground" only holds as irony. Of course, I am not only talking here about the *Romanian Literature as World Literature* project (Martin, Moraru, and Terian 2017), but also about the forthcoming *Transnational History of Romanian Literature*, which is also a collective project and will probably bear fruit in the form of the "toughest" history of Romanian literature since Călinescu's. Therefore, it seems to me that Iovănel's assumption of this project alone invites the reader to consider its literary dimension. I insist on it from my self-declared marginal position, but also as an essayist trained, *pour le meilleur et pour le pire*, in the French school.

Very little has been said about it, mainly because the nerve of Iovănel's writing has touched almost all the commentators so far, insofar as, with few exceptions, they are his colleagues, emulators or competitors within the same institutional space. Beyond the founding ambiguity of the discourse, which we

have already talked about, one that straddles the line between the objective and the subjective, a free indirect discourse as if spoken by a Stendhalian character—Stendhal after Althusser—Mihai Iovănel is a writer in love with writing, to a greater extent than most of us. Of all the critics of the 2000 generation that he reviews in the chapters devoted to (literary, in general) criticism, only Teodora Dumitru and Costi Rogozanu do not teach (but the latter, although he is now Andrei Terian's PhD candidate, worked for years as an op-ed author and as a TV moderator, performing oratorically).

There is a candour in Iovănel's writing that his sharpness hides well, but which his polemical instinct activates at every turn. This means that his texts and positions immediately attract either supporters or enemies. This discursive strategy has one obvious consequence: there will always be readers who will recognize themselves more in the moments of recreation, while others will identify with the spectators of the races. Each will, however, have moments when they are disturbed by what the other likes. This ambiguity works constitutively and can be traced on small spaces. It probably explains why, with the exception of the review by Florin Poenaru, a sociologist (Poenaru 2021,/), all the others, published by specialists in Romanian literature, from young PhD students to (former) members of the governing structures of the Writers' Union, have been—there may be exceptions—either negative or positive. Although Poenaru, the author of some of the most balanced and sagacious commentaries that have appeared on the *History*, speaks of promises that open and close as soon as they are made, his reproaches build upon initial praises: "It is Iovănel *at his best*, and the volume is and will be a reference in the Romanian cultural and intellectual space. This is also due, paradoxically perhaps, precisely to the internal contradictions of the volume that give it vitality" (Poenaru 2021). The undecidability of Iovănel's discursive positions/voices takes his candor to ever finer levels: the lexical, for example. Although he claims to be referring to an Althusserian passage in which the philosopher opposes aleatory to dialectical materialism, Iovănel often feels the need to use the term "dialectical" as a kind of Jack-of-all trades linguistic token. Used in place of or alongside "dynamic," "transformation," "modification," it does not immediately demand its use, but its ubiquitous presence offers a guarantee of coherence and fidelity to its own ideological assumptions.

Let us take an example. In Chapter 8, entitled "Points of Resistance," Iovănel writes: "the implicit model according to which literature and points of resistance interact in the system is, of course, dialectical and fluid; what seems obscene today becomes bourgeois conformity tomorrow"; on the same page, below: "being dialectical, the process of identifying points of resistance by writers is at the same time heuristic, based on trial and error" (Iovănel 2021,

274). The name of the chapter is the formula by which Iovănel identifies the nodes through which the actors of the literary field—writers, institutions, audiences, etc.—cross when they move from the Ceaușescu cultural regime to the post-Ceaușescu (or “communist” – “post-communist”) one, and which reminds Moraru, appropriately, of Lacan’s “points de capiton” (Moraru 2021, 9), and reminds me of a “maquette” (model)—the experimental model that the researcher makes in order to be able to print, through it, the form of reality which, thus reconstructed, can be subjected to laboratory experiments. These features therefore have a ‘modelling function’ (During 2015, 25). Only they are not part of a theoretical project, as would be the case for a philosopher. Their variations bring in Iovănel’s thought: ‘forms’ (identified with literary genres), ‘institutions’ (which no longer have the benefit of an explication in a working concept and open a chapter on censorship), ‘epistemologies’ in which one speaks of ‘the impact of new media’, ‘sociographies’, ‘the novel of anti-communism’, ‘the novel of pro-communism’, ‘ecologies’ (just one page) (...), after which the system becomes more complicated: ‘hierarchies’ (Iovănel 2021, 308) subclassify themselves into a system in which, ‘peasants’ is a subclass of ‘classes’ which is in turn a subclass of ‘hierarchies’, the latter being of the points of resistance.

The rhetorical remark I make does not concern a major structural flaw, but an inherent one, as long as the processed matter remains huge and seems to be constantly expanding. Therefore, unlike Poenaru, I am not at all bothered, once I get down to earth, by accepting the materialist position the author initially declares he assumes. Here I agree with Ștefan Baghiu: what else could Iovănel do in a book that must be an impressive object, aimed at a wide audience, and which also cannot be excused, but can only include the dimension of a literary project (we are not in a simulation of the novel, in Barthes’s terms, but in a version of the Real).

Critique’s Triad

In effect, what really matters, for the author, and for the commentators—I repeat, with one exception, all of them being specialists in Romanian literature—is the critical dimension of the *History*.

The figure of old Althusser—or of young Nikos, his character—is a *captatio* and a kind of confession. Iovănel does not come from the fringes of the country; although he does not teach—unfortunately!—at university, he writes his history from the centre of the literary scene whose main narratives he polemically overturns. On the first page of the book appear, in order, the names of Eugen Lovinescu, Nicolae Manolescu and G. Călinescu, while a fourth, Ștefan Baghiu, gets his first quote in extenso, but in a footnote. The *History* is both the

manifesto of a group—perhaps it would be too much to say of a generation—and an assertion of power. Not only the text, but also the object—to keep within the framework of materialism (no joke)—is important. Alongside Andrei Terian’s work on G. Călinescu, and published ten years later, Iovănel’s *History* is the only volume of criticism published by any of the generation active after the year 2000 to exceed 700 pages. It closes a decade which, as Iovănel rightly writes on pages 234-235, was opened by the critic and professor from Sibiu who, today, of all specialists in Romanian literature working in the country, has authored the most publications in academic journals abroad, in volumes and the most important research projects—in short, who has managed to turn Sibiu into the second academic centre in literary studies, after Cluj.

I believe that the same strategy should also explain the title: *The History of Contemporary Romanian Literature*. Over the past century, using “history” in a title has become the most prestigious packaging for a work of literary studies in Romania. Iovănel reworks it critically, but above all strategically. I am convinced that this title is above all intended to impose a recognizable object on the market. Iovănel’s history claims to be based on Lovinescu’s model, not because Iovănel has remained confined to the models of the interwar period, but because he has succeeded in questioning an inertial use of the term “ideology,” which has long been equated in Romania with authoritarianism. The first critical stake of the work is this: not to rehabilitate, but to rethink the concept of ideology, after decades of traumatic rejection. How to refute, to avoid a term essential to the freedom of any theoretical discourse? Refusing ideology is like the gesture of someone who, under communism, admires new blocks of flats and sees nothing strange when, in the evening, no electric light brings them out of the darkness. For the same reason—but we are talking about one of many—Iovănel claims a free Marxist affiliation, in order to try—an equally important and Promethean gesture in relation to the scale of the Romanian literary institution—to free the Marxist reference from the anathema that accompanied it and still accompanies it. That he feels the need to be a Marxist ‘for real’, that he resorts to Marxist ‘platitudes’ (Baghiu 2021, 83) and that he sometimes abuses words, all this only denotes the insecurity of the pioneer: the courage to be first is always put to the test. Finally, a third essential stake of the *History*, but perhaps secondary to the first two, is the historicization of the 80s generation (or Romanian postmodernism) through the long-awaited demonstration of the solidarity of literary—and political—ideology, between all the post-war generations who, from Simion-Manolescu to Lefter and later still, to Corin Braga and Caius Dobrescu, refused, for various reasons, to give up the tendency to protect literature from the sublunary world of everyday social life; or, if you like, which separated superstructure from infrastructure. The repositioning of

Romanian postmodernism in the continuity of a neo- or late-modernism also confirms tendencies in other literatures. In the French one, for example, the playful but elitist literature of the “Ecole de la Minuit” became historicized with the emergence of autofiction, of Houellebecq, and especially of an intermedial writing leading to a redefinition of the concept of literature (Rosenthal and Ruffel 2018). Iovănel’s history institutionalizes and explains a literary ethos that changed on a Wednesday evening in 1997, when Marius Ianuș recited a poem that suddenly historicized his older colleagues, T. O. Bobe and Sorin Gherguț, who had read before (Iovănel 2021, 304-305).

These three stakes make the epochal relevance of Iovănel’s work. But, and this again has not been noticed sufficiently, Iovănel chose to pay a price so that all these opinions, at odds with the Romanian literary establishment, could be communicated from a platform situated at the centre of the literary scene. One such polemic was born not so much from ideological differences as from the literary character of the work, which underlines a number of liabilities that have accumulated (see the campaign in *Observator cultural*). Under the title *The History of Contemporary Romanian Literature*, Mihai Iovănel gathers and arranges analytical essays, descriptive essays, almost paratactic enumerations, academic language and internal apostrophes. I think he does it deliberately: if he had stuck to academic rhetoric, the result would have been less spectacular, because the whole rhetorical cast would have had to be rethought and much of the published text would probably have been discarded; if he had aimed only at reaching a non-academic audience, then the theoretical armature of the work, in the sense of critical theory, which is the essential underpinning of the three great twists that nullify the legitimacy of the old Maiorescian-Manolescian narrative, would have been discarded.

What is the fate of a UFO that lasts? That of landing, first, losing its middle F; then, that of being identified, losing its U. That leaves O: a textual object that talks about a lot, and will no doubt be talked about more.

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