Literary Historiography as Event: Mihai Iovănel's History of Contemporary Romanian Literature: 1990-2020

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Abstract: In his essay, Moraru contends that Mihai Iovănel's 2021 *History of Contemporary Romanian Literature: 1990-2020* is a breakthrough in Romanian literary historiography and criticism overall. According to Moraru, the History revisits radically the terms of the Romantic contract that, in Romania and elsewhere, has typically been underwriting modern criticism. A form of critical realism and an exemplar of postmillennial Romanian literary and cultural studies, Iovănel's book is, in Moraru's view, not only provocative but also effectively transformative. To gauge the scope and nature of the changes advocated and enacted in the History, this article examines how Iovănel has put together what he calls the "system" of contemporary Romanian literature. Thus, Moraru is less concerned with which writers are included in the book and which are left out, seeking, instead, answers to a series of questions concerning primarily Iovănel's cultural-materialist and transnational studies-informed methodology. Along the same theoretical, historical, and political lines, Moraru discusses the project's makeup as well as the strength of the case the History makes for the need to have another look at a range of pre- and post-1990 literary movements, directions, styles, and authors, principally at postmodernism and its competition and successors in the twenty-first century.

Keywords: critical contract; critical realism; aesthetics; event; form; generation; ideology; literary historiography; literary realism; materialism; Marxism; paradigm shift; post-Cold War; postmillennial; postmodernism; post-postmodernism; system; transnationalism

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> "An artistic event is always the accession to form, or the formal promotion of a domain that has been considered extraneous to art."—Alain Badiou, *Philosophy and the Event*

> "Iovănel's *History* is a book you ought to own even if you have not read anything over the past hundred years."—Costi Rogozanu, *Libertatea*, July 4th, 2021

Released by Romania's leading press Polirom a few months ago, Mihai Iovănel's *History of Contemporary Romanian Literature: 1990-2020* took the social media by storm.[1] The publication set off a flurry of podcasts, interviews with the author, Facebook "likes," and online gossip.[2] The buzz drowned out the cybergrumbles of those who did not find their names in the book's index. Sometimes accompanied by the critic's photo, pictures of the austere front cover were everywhere, and feverishly shared links to the volume's press webpage lit up the web. But the excitement was not the usual upshot of marketing hype; in all likelihood, Polirom did not have much to do with it. To say that the *History* hit a nerve with a surprisingly wide audience and made quite a splash before being thumbed through, reviewed in more traditional formats and sites, and probed systematically in venues such as this special-topic issue of *Transilvania* would be an understatement.

Now that people have had enough time to take in all 712 pages and posturing bathos has let up some, a more dispassionate

assessment would have to admit that the initial enthusiasm was hardly unfounded. I would argue, in fact, that the vivacious and prompt reception of the *History*—a book of criticism, after all—marked, albeit amorphously and intuitively, a reaction to a *genuine event* in the authentic sense of the term. I acknowledge the redundancy of the italicized phrase, as philosophers like Alain Badiou might see it, but I also resort to it advisedly given that the 24-hour news cycle has trivialized actual events into daily occurrences. To rehash the obvious, events are few and far between. They happen, though, as Badiou also specifies, in history tout court as well as in the history of the arts. One could find them, only apparently twice removed from "reality," in art history and in literary history also—in the discipline of literary history, to be more precise.

My basic claim here is that the *History* is a true event in Romanian literary history and critical culture broadly. It is so, I further propose with another nod in Badiou's general direction, because in setting out to reconstitute what Iovănel determines as the system of contemporary Romanian Literature, the *History* is the first to rewrite, at long last, the Romantic contract underlying Romania's literary historiography and criticism throughout modernity.[3] What with putative events, *y compris* book releases and other similar affairs crying out for our attention, publishing events worth their ontological salt frequently get lost in the shuffle. Evental inflation makes it more difficult to appreciate the real thing when it materializes, but this is exactly the gauntlet I wish to pick up apropos of Iovănel's book.

A Transformative Work

A quantum leap in its field, the *History* is one of a kind and yet on the same cultural wavelength with its historical ambiance, which coincides with the three decades covered by the book itself; it is unique both within this timespan—our own, the contemporary—and without, to wit, in Romanian literary historiography as a totality; it is symptomatic in its own way, as well as momentous; and most importantly, it is, as Gilles Deleuze describes the phenomenology of eventfulness, transformative.[4] For it does not just speak, by my lights at least, to a tipping point in Romanian literary history and criticism. In conversation with several other postmillennial scholarly milestones, including Iovănel's own 2017 monograph *Ideologies of Literature in Romanian Postcommunism*, the *History* also participates in, and quickens, this sea change.[5]

Yet again, the volume echoes and engages with the system of the wider mutations that have affected post-Cold War Romania inside and outside literature and its study, from the painful birth of the market economy and liberal democracy to the rise of a well-defined postmillennial generation of writers, critics, and activists to related, spectacular shifts in the theory, practice, format, and media of literary criticism and history. Multiply attuned to its postcommunist *zeitgeist* and thus a *tour de force* in what I would dub critical realism—one germane to the "capitalist realism" analyzed inside the *History*'s covers—Iovănel's book fulfills particular historical, literary-cultural, and political expectations. This accounts for the animated response it has already received, sometimes from quarters where literature, let alone contemporary literature, is neither the hottest nor the coolest topic. All the same, this doorstop of a literary history stuffed with lengthy footnotes, bibliographies, and reading lists has been perceived as fresh, timely, and, yes, cool well in advance of its public perusal. In brief, this seems to be the much-awaited book that "had to" be written and published now by an author, I would submit in turn, with Iovănel's profile and commitment.[6] The *History* rattles the various cages and boxes inside which we have been doing our thinking but should not surprise us. It is a tome for postcommunist and post-postmodern times—once again, a work on literary and historical transformation and also itself transformative in the sense that, to put it plainly, doing Romanian literary history in the wake of Iovănel's *History* cannot be what it had been before it.

Since, as I suggest, the context "called for" the *History*, there must be a certain logic behind its appearance. "Predictability" would be too strong a wrong word even though, *nota bene*, in hindsight, incidents of a certain magnitude are "bound to happen." In any case, Iovănel makes it clear in the "Introductory Note," "Acknowledgments," and elsewhere, that the *History* did not come out of the blue or, to stick with Badiou's lingo, from the "edge of the void," that is, from a completely excluded outside to the notions and practices informing analyses, terminologies, and critical categories in mainstream Romanian literary historiography and criticism.[7] Much like the literature it attends to, the book is representative or, as I have offered, symptomatic of bigger things afoot, themselves remarkable, eventful in nature, and we may remember that evental authorship has in Badiou a collective component that comprises, among other things, the audience's reactions.[8]

On the other hand, the *History* is, as the French philosopher might also say, "foundational."[9] However, instead of striving futilely to wipe the slate of literary history clean methodologically or otherwise, Iovănel refurbishes the existing platform, recycles what is available, and even self-recycles by retrofitting, detailing, and expanding ideas, language, readings, and chunks of text from his previous publications. To evoke Jacques Derrida's discussion of Claude Lévi-Strauss in conjunction with a previous *événement* in the "human sciences" more than half a century ago, if classical historians, critics, and humanists generally were "engineers" of presumptuous totalities, Iovănel is a resourceful and witty bricoleur in a no-nonsense, unassuming, and pragmatic kind of way.[10] Openly militant, he is calmly descriptive and unabashedly aspirational. Both theoretical and pragmatic, the *History* shakes up an entire discipline, resetting it not by casting aside things *in toto* but by resituating and sublating them over and over, whether we talk about the homage-cum-critique of Eugen Lovinescu or the sharp eye for the survival of some postmodern values and techniques in, say, postmillennial speculative fiction and intellectual debates.[11]

The very decision to write a literary history at all is telling in this respect. True, "normality" does stink in the critical culture

the *History* parts company with, and dominant ideology does rear its ugly head in all-too-recurrent, self-serving, and fetishizing celebrations of the "aesthetic," but the unmendable tear Iovănel rips into their taken-for-granted coherence and institutional-administrative legitimacy—in the reigning scholarly paradigm overall—is doubled by a considerable amount of creative and responsible engagement with what one commonly refers to as "tradition." I say "doubled" deliberately because the event I am talking about presents, as Derrida also points out, the outer form (*forme extérieure*) of a "rupture" (*rupture*) and "doubling" (*redoublement*).[12] This is the two-step dance with said tradition, be it in literature or in literary studies. By this paso doble of sorts, the *History*'s complex disruptions, displacements, and realignments both hammer out a vision of contemporary Romanian literature and open up interstices in which other literary periods, bodies of work, and problems are or could be reconceptualized and reconstructed otherwise.

Driving the book's thoughtful and eminently honest revisionism, this groundbreaking move interests me throughout. Apropos of it, my intervention raises three intertwined issues. They share a number of elements, and, before I get started, I want to single out two of them. One is, as I have already indicated, the "system of literature." This is the system within which contemporary Romanian literature comes into being and that Iovănel pursues in the *History*. The other is the form of this pursuit. For it is form, Badiou dixit, that ultimately *trans*-forms art—namely, form that, I should probably add, has nothing to do with modernist formalism, form that essentially makes an artwork, no less than a work *on* the literary arts, an evental site and therefore a conduit of significant change.[13] Thus, the questions I pose regard, first, the form of the *History* as literary history, what the latter means to Iovănel, and accordingly, how he goes about his tasks as a literary historian of a different, post-2000 breed. Next, I look into the book's structure and organizing principles, into how the *History* is built, and finally into how, contentwise too, the work itself acts formally, re-forming the narrative of contemporary and even modern national literature and pushing us to rethink how we value and read a whole spectrum of directions, periods, schools, generations, styles, authors, works, and so forth.

Contemporary Literary History, History of Contemporary Literature

My first question is, in other words, methodological. Under methodology comes a cluster of concerns, and they too are interrelated. The most important pertain to genre, more to the point, to the scholarly genre in play here. In what sense, it bears asking, is the *History* a new kind of Romanian literary history, one that overhauls the practice of literary historiography with a decisiveness itself historicized, mindful, that is, of how previous inquiries of this type and Romanian criticism largely can be tactically repurposed by an effectively contemporary literary history? Which are the discipline- and genre-specific maneuvers that set up the *History* as a potentially epoch-making moment of discontinuity and renewal in Romanian literary historiography and literary-cultural studies broadly? And if one of the most consequential among these operations entails, as it ostensibly does, a rebuttal of G. Călinescu and his followers' obsolete "methodological nationalism" and of the "aestheticism" bound up with it, then what solution does Iovănel provide in the final part, one titled, quite tongue-in-cheek, "Transnational Specificity"? (645-680).[14] Indeed—and this is my overarching question at this juncture—what does it mean to write literary history not only after "the transnational turn in literary studies," to recall Paul Jay's 2010 book, but also after such shift occurred in the world "out there" at the fateful dawn of the 1990s?[15]

The short answer to the last question is that literary history simply cannot be written any more. But, as we know, "short answers" are usually warmups for the longer, real answers, and those, as far as the issue at hand goes, wrestle with how we define the history of literature and the writing of this history today nationally and internationally. On this score, a modicum of context is in order, and so I might note, to begin with, that American critics, who have been keenest on such definitions and redefinitions, no longer do American literary histories, that is to say, literary histories in the old-fashioned, European, post-Enlightenment, and monistic sense of the notion. Illustrated by the late nineteenth-century Western literary histories of Francesco De Sanctis and Gustave Lanson, this concept foregrounds an "organic" and integrative understanding of literary community as a source of teleological discourse whose development purports to corroborate and actually boost the similar and similarly fictional progress of national narrative. American critics have abandoned this kind of scholarly epos some time ago. In Europe, and especially in Romania, the situation is different. Europeans are still writing fairly traditional literary histories of their countries as well as of the United States. Austrian critic Mario Klarer has published one, 130 pages long, in 2013.[16] Its title is *A Short Literary History of the United States*, and the book has been advertised as "introductory." A Brit, Richard Gray, did a similar "brief history" in 2011,[17] but this is the shortened version of the one published in 2004 and reissued in 2012.[18]

There is something to be said about the narrow impact of such panoramas, about their sometimes pro forma presence in curricula, on doctoral reading lists, and so on, for there exists some deep-seated skepticism about what this scholarship can do. From early on, American students of literature have been aware of the bewildering diversity and scope of their subject, to the point of being quite upfront about how much one has to skip over in order to cobble together a minimally coherent narrative. The outcome has been the quasi extinction of the genre—once more, if by genre we mean the classical form described earlier. Otherwise, there have been plenty of historical *projects*, and this is the best term I can come up with to reference the collective volumes edited by Emory Elliott (the 1988 *Columbia Literary History of the United States*) or by Greil Marcus and Werner Sollors (the 2009 1000-page *New Literary*

History of America).

Such examples attest to a new and distinct understanding of literary history, of national history, and of the nation as well, and so does the other genre that has all but replaced old-school literary history in the United States: the multivolume, sometimes chronologically organized anthology such as the Heath, the latest Norton, and so on. All these intimidatingly looking volumes, thousands of pages each, scramble to limn the historical multiplicity and dissemination of American letters across all sorts of divisions, classifications, and canons. Both recovery works and attempts to organize and promote the newly recovered, they track a process of dispersion, a centripetal, decentering movement of heterogeneous material rather than the gelling of this unstable mosaic into a coherent literary picture of the nation. We may dismiss them as counter-histories, but their authors remain interested in history, including national history. It is not so much that these critics feel apprehensive or apologetic about either, although they occasionally do. As I have maintained, a major and characteristic worry has been that the consistency of the historical account is artificial, a discourse effect that comes at a price, and that this price—the simplification, cooptation, and marginalization of some of the surveyed phenomena—is too steep. Under the circumstances, many deem not looking at or for the "big picture" at all actually preferable to painting one that is too narrow, hence the growing popularity of what I would call a fragment-oriented, *microscalar* engagement with things literary. This favors a more modest but insistent and nuanced focus on small things, on regional and sub-regional realities (on literary and cultural regionalism), and on shorter time periods, while augmenting the material sensitivity, political acumen, and characteristic granularity of critical perception by concentrating on race, class, ethnicity, and gender *inside* such things and intervals, as well as on the idiomatic, the exceptional, the marginalized, and the dissenting rather than on the presumed rule or norm. This is how we have learned quite a bit about a lot of significant issues that otherwise fall through the cracks of more ambitious, "big-hole" kind of intellectual grids. Giving the lie to these cognitive maps and to their epistemologically grand narratives have been less-totalizing sketches that have captured pieces or aspects of history in carefully qualified cultural locales and traditions (recent Asian-American poetry rather than generic overviews of the "history of American poetry"; Native American literature—in fact literature*s*—rather than American literature; queer modernism*s*—again, plural—rather than the history of U. S. modernism, etc.).

In the United States, Romania, and elsewhere, post-Cold War literature has been drawing, however, bigger and bigger, kaleidoscopic pictures of the human, portraying more and more vividly a more and more unbounded world. Thus, literature itself has been forcing its historians to pull back from the canvas and take in not only the individual trees but also the forest *while not losing sight* of the shortcomings of those *H*istories whose horticultural designs, so to say, appear unwarranted retrospectively. It is in this cautious vein that some critics have been pleading for a comparative or "worlded" study of American literature and its history. A necessary complement to microscalar inquisitiveness, this *macroscalar* approach stems from an awareness that the tiny, the local, the idiomatic, the cloistered, the isolated, and the indigenous have been lodged, across the ages, inside and outside literary representation, at the crossroads of the world, and so they are inherently worlded—polytopias, planetary intersections of spaces, communities, cultural patterns, themes, and devices.[10] These have always been places where styles and traditions dovetail and mix rather than discretely territorialized, siloed sites of human life and expression. And yet, to reiterate, the amplitude and repercussions of dovetailing, the overlaps, the contaminations, and the wavelike wash of cultural discourse across post-Westphalian territorialities and all manner of frontier have never been wider and more world-changing, more de- and re-territorializing than at our moment in history.

In this context, it has become increasingly clear that neither literary history as we know it, beholden as it has been to state-sponsored epistemology and Kantian aesthetics, nor the ethno- and geo-linguistic territorialization of literature into national literature fields and departments is up to the challenges of contemporaneity. This massive provocation addresses our critical imaginary, which has been lagging behind writers' capacity to take the measure of today's world. At issue here, then, are our ability and willingness to reconsider how the critical gaze constitutes its literary object; where and how this object aggregates as we look for and at it (Inside national borders or across them? Within the time-honored aesthetic field and categories or in a wider domain and under more capacious rubrics?); and how the object's aggregation jibes with extant aggregation units such as those coalescing around practices, subject positions, and locations of class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, race, faith, material culture, labor, finance, language, and nationhood, where the latter has been by far the most consequential, the most territorializing spatially and cognitively. Discarding at least in part a separatedness- or statal paradigm-based model indebted to the center/margin, "in here"/"out there," "our" culture/"theirs," high-/lowbrow, and other similar *disjunctions* typical of coloniality, postcoloniality, and the earlier stages of multicultural awareness, the critical and literary-historical model comparatists and Americanists—and American comparatists such as Wai Chee Dimock, for instance—have envisaged is *conjunctive* and *relational*. Whereas old-style literary history inches forward in straight line along the vertical axis of "autochthonous" tradition and presses into service a "tree" model of literature and culture, the typically post-Cold War historical inquiry takes snapshots of the multidirectional, *horizontal* literary flows over the ever-evolving and unstable, rhizome-like networks spreading concomitantly inside and across national cultures. Domestically, it registers but does not necessarily "synthesize" the social distribution of the material, the popular, and the amalgamate. At the same time, it attends to the innately ideological armature of form, to the

political frictions molding and fundamentally "impurifying" the aesthetic, and to gender, sexuality, class, and other sequences of the social html undergirding literature's poetic and novelistic screensavers—hence the demotic accents, the "sociologism," the bricolage, and the piecemeal feel of otherwise well-thought-out and clearly articulated arguments. Across cultures, histories like this resonate to a cognate patchwork, to the intercultural, diasporic, deep-space, indeed, world-scale contacts, juxtapositions, and borrowings by virtue of which local, seemingly self-begotten, standalone, and autonomous entities appear more readily what they have been, if less extensively and conspicuously, all along: spinoffs, "attachments," relations, anchors in the elsewhere.[20]

On one hand, then, literature is, and is treated as, materially and socially constructed. On the other, this construction is worlded, with the proviso that dealing with it as such does not exclude healthy skepticism, not to say political vigilance, in the face of grandiose "interconnectivity" and other accoutrements of the global sublime. The cultural and geocultural vectors of literary production work in such projects like the two arms of a scissors; more and more post-Cold War critics recognize both that material factors act locally and that, today more than ever, they are produced, circulated, and reproduced globally within, in between, and across spaced-out locations. There is no question that this double recognition informs recent literary historiography and criticism, that it marks their *form*. By the same token, it turns them into critical realism; what the world looks like and in all actuality *is*, its twofold, "trans" dynamic within and astride cultural-aesthetic and national boundaries, supplies or inspires the method.

Critical Realism and the Fetish

Iovănel is not "importing" this method, as we say too cavalierly these days—nor is he trying to "export" Romanian literature by importing new modalities of reading it. One does not import something that is already a staple of critical economies near and far, no matter what we hear from grumpy old academics (and Academicians) who did not get the memo. He is definitely availing himself of the approach and related terminology, but he does so without touting them on every page. Anyway, the modus operandi is clear, as is the need for it. Epistemologically, Iovănel is a realist who cannot but follow through on this worldview—and more generally on what we call context—and then let the analytical chips fall where they may.[21] This is why the *History* too bears witness to its subject formally, i.e., as a description structurally apposite to what it describes. By dint of the same two-pronged, "trans" move, this presentation mode works back into reading the twin, sociopolitical and worldly system of literature—the world beyond the nation or, more accurately, national literature as inscription of and into greater literary and socioeconomic assemblages. In Badiou's terms, these are all "domains" that have been underappreciated and dismissed as "extraneous" by the Titu Maiorescu-Nicolae Manolescu line in Romanian criticism.[22] Especially after the publication of Călinescu's 1941 *History of Romanian Literature from Its Origins to the Present*—a book already methodologically antiquated when it came out—this tradition has been, with the exception of the Stalinist hiatus, the main and sometimes sole ideological sponsor of the Romanian critical establishment. No wonder the latter has harked back to it repeatedly in moments of "crisis," real or imaginary, as Iovănel observes (86).

True, the up-and-coming postmodern critics of late Communism did have an "anti-1960s" agenda. It is also true, as it is revealing, that this was shaped by a distaste for Călinescu's stylistic and nationalist histrionics and for the airy-fairy metaphorics of late modernism, by a refreshing knack for the popular and material culture of the "everyday" (as Iovănel himself stresses), as well as by other animadversions, proclivities, and idiosyncrasies. These would and did put the young critics of the 1980s on a collision course with the critical status quo and its sources of symbolic capital such as literary magazines, presses, the Writers' Union, and higher-education structures. But because both sides had the same, bigger fish to fry—that was, of course, sheer survival under, if not always also common opposition to, Communism—the parties formed early on an alliance that, no longer in effect today as it was decades ago, nevertheless held up well into the post-Cold War era. Admittedly, the entente was inevitable under the circumstances. Moreover, it was lucrative for everybody concerned, before and after 1990, although, to my mind, the jury is still out as to whether what Iovănel describes as the "coming to power" of the "Generation of the 1980s" (169), aided as it was by critics like Manolescu, is comparable to the aggressive post-2000 campaign to coopt the new "young critics" into the outmoded research sweatshops, cultural frameworks, and political designs of the Romanian Academy.

Be that as it may, Iovănel deserves credit for going where no critic of the 1980s generation has gone before. In a genre both like and unlike the one responsible for our very critical predicament, he has put out an opus magnum that interrupts the tradition behind said establishment once again, this time around on a sturdier methodological basis than in the 1950s and hopefully for good. In this sense, the *History* completes, odd as it may seem, the critique project Ion Bogdan Lefter and his companions did not quite get off the ground despite all the insurgent talk back in the day. In this sense too, the program of Romanian postmodernism has *not* been carried out.[23] It is only fitting and dialectically so, I would further argue, that instrumental to this belated, post-postmodern completion of a project at least theoretically compatible with early Romanian postmodernism is an occasionally severe but on the whole fair and balanced reassessment of the 1980s cohort of critics and writers. In this sense also, the eventful interruption strikes me as not blindly destructive but thoughtfully, if uncompromisingly, reconstructive. It is so because it hews close to aforementioned realism, whether historically, as it revaluates the dynamic of generations, aesthetically, as it reconceptualizes the relationships between literary representation and its originating milieu, or politically, as it

shows that the historical and the aesthetic work hand in glove, i. e., that the 1960s "aesthetic autonomy" fantasy is alive and well past the 1960s/1980s "divide."

Indeed, left to their devices, the 1960s elders and backers of the 1980s Young Turks breathed new life into this delusion. In the process, they "fetishized" an entire way of dealing with literature, then literature itself, and the national canon altogether (105), whose self-professedly aesthetic, culturally aseptic, and "apolitical" reading has become de rigueur. This critical "style" is still practiced, with custodial trepidation, by 1960s generation diehards such as Eugen Simion—hence Simion's enthusiasm, specifies Iovănel most insightfully, for Antoine Compagnon's antimodernist theory, one that, flatfooted as it is, has been embraced pronto by Romanian conservatives (232)—and the same style and germane public declarations are still the litmus test new talents have to pass to get the nod.[24] But apolitical or unideological reading is, Iovănel also insists, just another, disingenuous politics insofar as it disregards (at best) or denies (at worst) the bearings of usually unjust sociopolitical arrangements on form and meaning. With the *History*, such arrangements or "contexts," be they micro or macro, national or transnational, are back in the critical picture. Paramount to the book, this return of the epistemologically repressed boils down to the notion that neither a poem nor an entire national tradition in poetry is an island; they are part and come out of an archipelago, of a world of worlds. On this ground, critical descriptions ought to be "thick," as a New Historicist would have said, that is, they must factor in the complex coarticulations of literary forms with other discursive and social entities, and so—unavoidably—with ideology (the upholding of certain values) and politics (the sanctioning of particular actions). These all make up the system of literary production. Turning a blind eye to the material and sociopolitical intricacies of this system and reading a poem as if it miraculously ("autonomously") came into existence by pulling its linguistic bootstraps decontextualize it, reduces it to something it neither does nor is while sweeping under the rug its actual genesis, meaning-making protocols, and nature. This commonsense and flexible Marxism[25] helps us understand why decontextualization is fetishizing, as Iovănel explains (105-107): it is so as long as it presumes to tackle things in and of themselves (as if they ever existed in this noumenal state), simultaneously ignoring or severing the umbilical cords tethering them into bigger ensembles that, because they have been involved genetically, remain useful interpretively.

Literature and its Material Context: Institutions, Ideologies, and the Trouble with Postmodernism

More than anything else, Iovănel punctures the bubble of the fetish resulted from the context's erasure. To that effect, he traces some of the most relevant among these connections and interactions, starting out with the much-ballyhooed "autonomy" of the aesthetic and closing with its more overtly political flipside, national "specificity." Cleverly bookending the *History* is thus a dual critique of aesthetocentrism and ethnocentrism. These are the two faces of the same ideological coin minted reflexively and unreflectively, generation after generation, in the factory of Romanian criticism. In both, Iovănel confronts an identically idealist hegemonic paradigm dressed up in the hand-me-downs of Romantic aesthetics in one case and ethnicity in the other, and so underneath the once sublime garments, he searches for the cultural subliminal—the heteronomous underbelly of the allegedly autonomous and self-sufficient. Getting into the weeds of this complexity is a challenge to uncritical formalism and a regained freedom, as Iovănel tells us; amusingly enough, what Manolescu's "light" sociology did only in part in the otherwise still unsurpassed *Noah's Ark* and what Henri H. Stahl's (97), Paul Cornea, and Mihai Dinu Gheorghiu's more *bona fide* sociology had a hard time doing at all under the "Marxist" regime of the 1970s and 1980s, the *History* can finally accomplish in *post*communism.

The heteronomy in question or, with another vocabulary, the "system" of literary production uncovered by the critic around and *inside* aestheticism and ethnicism is cultural and geocultural, respectively. The former keeps him busy in parts one and two, where he takes the ideological and institutional lay of the land before canvassing the literary landscapes proper. Since ideologies, like institutions, and literature with them, live in history, and since Iovănel does a history of contemporary Romanian literature where he dissects developments ("evolutions") in various literary sectors, his first step is to define contemporaneity. It turns out, the latter is temporally coextensive with the post-Cold War years. It may not sound like a big deal, but it is, inside and outside Romanian literature and criticism. More than the postmodernism of the 1980s, this contemporaneity, this Romanian historical and cultural "now," is fully, worldly con-temporary. With yet another ironically out-of-date vocabulary, it is "synchronous" and so in many regards com-parable—can be juxtaposed meaningfully—to cultural realities elsewhere and certainly in the United States. There, the 1990s also marked the "baroque" phase of late, self-plagiarizing, and fast declining postmodernism, while the post-9/11 decades have registered the accelerated supplanting of the postmodern by novel, more direct, and more directly political modes of expression. As Ştefan Baghiu and others have pointed out, and as Iovănel himself seems to imply, what we are talking about is the "present" or *new* contemporary—the post-Cold War rather than the entire post-World War II interval.[26] Iovănel also says, and he is basically right, that a public debate of the contemporary was either impossible or "ahistorical" under Communism (10), which comes down to the same thing, and which also implies that, when such a conversation becomes possible, it should be "historicized." In the *History*, it surely is.

To historicize his subject, the critic leans half seriously and half in jest on Lovinescu. There is nothing facetious about this, though. Afterall, we would do well to remember that Romania's quintessentially modernist critic did care about the ideological and about how much of it swirls around or fuels an aesthetic platform, and I cannot help noticing one more time

how an individualizing ingredient of the ideology of the most militant among the 1980s critics, namely, their self-confessed "Lovinescianism" and "necessary dogmatism," bears fruit finally in a substantial work of criticism that is not only postmillennial but also post-"nineteen-eightist." Can we perhaps deduce, as I would, from this and other places in the *History*, including Iovănel's evenhanded references to such mutually illuminating polar opposites as Simion and Lefter, that there is, after all, a materialist and ideological strain in Romanian postmodernism worth salvaging and even building on?

At any rate, the work done in the first two parts is unprecedented. Important in and of itself, the attention to historical context, to realities *urbi et orbi*, and to reality generally paves the way and provides the rationale for the valuing, in the *History's* middle sections, of realism—"poverty-porn"-obsessed, indigency-fascinated ("squalorist"), or "capitalist"—and of a truly "contemporary," sobering, "serious," and responsible literature over experimentalism, gratuitous irony, and "meta" fireworks. All such gimmicks feel stale by now, Iovănel correctly observes. Furthermore, they threaten retrospectively to fold the other, inter- and metatextual vector of the literary 1980s back into the "idealistic-solipsistic-autarchic literature concept" resurrected in the 1960s and holding sway—we saw why—into the early-mid 1990s (358). This concept is associated with Gheorghe Crăciun and the Târgovişte School's "bookish autarchy" (358)—if there could have been anything of this sort in a public arena where the absolute concentration of power automatically rendered any expressive form so hyperpolitical, a form *of* political statement. That aside, the reverse of hyperpoliticization—the dilution of the political—is real too: while the political claims of the Romanian postmoderns were made in earnest and the regime, including the censors, picked up on them and overreacted brutally and characteristically, the political *effectiveness* of the generation of the 1980s' joshing aesthetic is an entirely different matter. It is high time we admit that this aesthetic did little beyond aggravating—granted, disproportionately—the censors, the apparatchiks, and even the Securitate. And we must also recognize that the failure to achieve more politically has to do, at least to some extent, with the de facto political defanging of international postmodernism at the hands of the young Romanian writers of the 1980s, as Teodora Dumitru has impeccably demonstrated apropos of poetry, and as Iovănel helps us notice in fictional prose.[27] .

Now, to expand on their own argument, if postmodernism *were* as "antihistorical" (359) as the likes of Fredric Jameson would have you believe, then it would indeed lack any political antennae and axes to grind, which is simply not the case, and would be an *a*political movement that, either in the Beat poets or in the French novelists gravitating *Tel Quel*, would therefore *not* have to be washed out politically by its Romanian counterpart. Against Jameson, with whom Iovănel takes issue in other places more unambiguously, the Romanian Marxist argues nonetheless for a political washing out of U. S. postmodernism in its Romanian avatar.[28] Romania's postmodernism is thus, he comments, not just one deprived of its socioeconomic infrastructure, one without postmodernity, as Mircea Martin has aptly said, but also one without postmodernism's political superstructure—this postmodernism is politically toothless.[29]

What the *History* supplies concretely in way of analysis of and value judgment about authors such as Lefter, Mariana Marin, Magda Cârneci, and Mircea Cărtărescu—whose statures, in all fairness, are acknowledged—suggests, however, that the problem is not so much what their political aesthetics did or did not pull off during the 1980s as what its viability and sociocultural adequacy were *vingt ans après*.[30] By that time, and pretty much like in the United States, postmodernism had largely stalled. This must be said loud and clear. As postmillennial writers and critics assert ever so often, and as Iovănel himself details, most postmodern authors had got by then stuck in a repeat mode, recycling themselves feverishly, whether in their own works or, even with more ironically Borgesian panache, in the output of the agonal postmoderns of the 1990s such as Caius Dobrescu—his 2007 novel *Doctoral Thesis* (Teză de doctorat) goes to show that Dobrescu is to Cărtărescu what David Foster Wallace is to Thomas Pynchon, and if you like Wallace, then you should also enjoy Dobrescu's work, which stacks up quite honorably against, say, *Infinite Jest*. Moreover, the parallel is warranted both aesthetically and politically. From legitimate stature, and status, to statue of himself or herself and, shockingly enough, status quo advocate and neoliberal-conservative in political matters: in a nutshell, this seems to have been, especially since 2000, the down-spiraling trajectory of a fading postmodernism that, in Romania, the United States, and other places, keeps offering itself up as representation of a world and solution to problems with which, alas, it appears woefully out of touch. If indeed pre-World War II Romanian "classics" became in the 1960s "a collection of statues" (97) dusted off in a hurry and reinstalled on their aesthetically reinforced plinths, this is the last thing our postmodern "classics" should have wished for themselves. In fact, they must be grateful to Iovănel for keeping them honest, for maintaining, that is, an environment of exigence or, as I say, realism around postmodernism, contemporary literature, and Romanian literary culture overall.

This undaunted lucidity, one of both assessment (unflinching) and style (sparse, not beating around the bush) has its own tradition. In the United States, it has been relatively robust before, after, and even during the New Criticism. This line of work is carried on these days, in twentieth- and twenty-first-century studies alone, by well-known critics such as Alan Nadel, Michael Bérubé, Bruce Robbins, Peter Hitchcock, and Sophia A. McClennen, all of them sympathetic to Marxism and some of them even entertaining "public intellectual" aspirations. In Romania, it runs from the first truly modern Romanian critic, Constantin Dobrogeanu-Gherea, through Marxists and non-Marxists such as post-World War II *Viaţa Românească* figures like Paul Georgescu, Ileana Vrancea, Cornel Regman, and Alexandru George, all the way to Costi Rogozanu and his feisty compadres. Officially and ruthlessly marginalized by aesthetic hegemonism, this line of Romanian

criticism gets now another lease on life with the *History*.

The more Marxist figures in the enumeration above would insist, as Iovănel does explicitly in his critique of Romanian postmoderns like Crăciun and implicitly throughout, that "ontology does not repeat philology" (358), let alone, I might quip, University of Bucharest's Philology—this is, of course, the multidepartment academic unit from which many pillars of Crăciun's generation got their degrees and, after 1990, jobs and whose own bubble would burst painfully upon graduation, leaving behind little more than the antiheroic sagas of rural commute à la Mircea Nedelciu and Alexandru Muşina. Iovănel is hardly a fan of this stuff, but the bigger point here is, yet again, this: bubbles where people or texts sprout in vitro are delusional, and if they had ever been anything more than that, they blew up after the Cold War in ways that render the aesthetic of flip in-jokes, same old, same old anti-Socialist Realism parodies, and bookish winks inadequate, *uncontemporary*. Or, the *History* endorses, as Marxism ordinarily has, a literature joined at the hip with history, sensitive to its unfolding social drama, and practices a criticism congruous to that literature's sensitivity. Responding to the latter, Iovănel, ever the realist, cannot but put back the ontological horses before the philological cart. This methodological and political move is the event behind the event, as it were; it is, in short, the main paragraph in the new critical contract that affords the *History*. As such, it also accounts for the book's structure, beginning with the sequential logic of the main chapters. Thus, part one, "The Development of Ideology," and part two, "The Development of the Literary System and Criticism," explain not only how literature is going to be approached in the following segments ideologically and systemically, as an aesthetic precipitate of a system consisting of aesthetic and non-aesthetic components, but also why beauty, ugliness, and everything in between are sociopolitically "contingent" in an Althusserian sense (12) and would therefore have to be dealt with accordingly. The ideological analysis of literature, stresses Iovănel here, is possible and in effect required because ideology is neither external to literary form nor ulterior to it, a critic's arbitrary, unescapably biased way of framing literature.

This sounds fine, but the proof is in the pudding. In other words, we still need, and get, a "brief history of postcommunism" (19-24) complete, on one side, with the major political and ideological positions formulated and defended *as such* (chapters 2 and 3) and on the other, with sites, communities, agencies, educational institutions, research instruments, and cultural formations like "cultural myths" and identity representations whose political-ideological gambit is couched in the more social, material, financial, and managerial actions and discourses fashioning the production, circulation, and promotion of literature and culture after Communism. Here, Iovănel gives us the public biography of the problem at hand but also prefaces the presentation with a concise pre-1990 genealogy of the issue, sometimes reaching back to pre-1900 moments and authors. All these historical excursus and even the more text-oriented analyses of later parts read like a "detective novel"—all allusions intended, including those to Iovănel's own work.[31] Economic and brisk in style, action-packed historically, politically, and critically, the *History* is a page-turner if there ever was one in its genre. Călinescu comes to mind right away, but as a parallel of contrast. What keeps you awake in his *History* are bombastic, impossibly manneristic style, the faux suspense of critical hyperboles—here comes "our Homer"; watch out for another "universal" masterpiece in cutely folkloric getup, etc.—and the obstinacy of Romantic epic "construction." Iovănel's work has an epic dimension to it too, but this has nothing to do with lofty "epos," much less with the burlesque of the actual commentary. There are places where reding him feels like driving through Alpine switchbacks. It pays to stay alert: the pace, the surgical verdicts, the on-target political insights, and the self-imposed candor are all there. Călinescu's antiheroic comedy of errors becomes at this point in Iovănel's *History* a realist inventory of sometimes unpopular but otherwise hard truths about the genetic ambiance of contemporary Romanian literature.

One of these is the gradual but pronounced drift to the right of literary criticism and surrounding sociocultural apparatus as neoliberalism gained momentum after 1990. The privatization, wild capitalism, and the mystique of the market that began to affect the economy, social life, and public rhetoric bled synergetically into critical debates and hardened the conservative and far-right positions of the cultural and academic establishment. As Iovănel hints time and over again, it takes a lot of false consciousness to ignore how the pieces of the puzzle come together, how this press, that magazine, a particular government, that government's agency in charge with Romanian culture's international promotion, and a certain book if not an entire publishing house list intersect, connect, and gel meaningfully, turning, together, the puzzle into the "system" the critic is searching for. Not that he would ever spoon-feed you a certain conjecture or conclusion; the picture speaks for itself.

Over and against this system, the 1990s-early 2000s tug-of-war between pre-World War II "necrophilia" and postmodern liberalism makes sense. The clash was more than just the vacuous skirmishes self-appointed culture wars correspondents like Sorin Antohi reported at the time, but its dénouement seems now a foregone conclusion also. Despite the challenges mounted by critics affiliated with publications such as *Observator cultural*, the right and far-right kept on consolidating apace up until the mid-2000s, when a new generation of intellectuals, activists, and writers got a firm foothold on the cultural scene. It did not help either that Cărtărescu, as Iovănel reminds us, declared in 1999 that the postmoderns were neoliberal (155). They are if you think they are, I guess, but especially if you think you are. And even if deep down you are not, the veer right happens, and it did happen, with you and without you, and it did so as part of a broader right (well, wrong) turn inside literature and across the hypothetical borders separating literature and other, sometimes anti-postmodern forms of social and political action and discourse.

Thus, the earlier bloviations of second-generation affiliates of the Constantin Noica circle such as Horia-Roman Patapievici became more patently, and appear as such in the aftermath of Sorin Lavric's AUR career, the extreme and even extremist stuff they had been from the get-go; Lavric own's political vision is all *in nuce* in his more journalistic and scholarly work, as Iulia Popovici has demonstrated;[32] and, also in *România literară*, the anti-PC crusade (163-167), usually a byproduct or companion of anticommunism, proves not at all incompatible with far-right hysteria. Are a "nineteen eightist" like Mircea Mihăieş and Lavric strange bedfellows? This is a question, if it is one, for Manolescu, although I would pose it to Lefter and other Romanian postmoderns as well.

Resistance Points, Breakpoint, Revisionary Claims

Whatever the answers, one thing is clear: it is within this socieconomic and rhetorical ecosystem—one in turn communicating with broader, transnational frameworks and circuitries of material and aesthetic traffic—that axial cultural myths, old and new, pop up or return from the Socialist Nationalist crypt, including "PC," the ultimate zombie notion, and its kissing cousin Dracula. Conceptual weirdos such as "new protochronism" and "Dacopathy" make an appearance too, and it is hardly surprising that critics, journalists, and politicians who do the bidding of the ideological rookies and revenants portrayed with the same realistic brushstrokes in chapters 5, 6, and 7 of part two are dead set against any talk of gender, sexual choice, race, class, ability, migration, place (location or region), environment, the inanimate, the non-human, subculture, and other subject formations without which no literature and no form of human behavior are imaginable. Historically, the same aestheticist vulgate has been responsible for dismissing these formations as irrelevant, faddish, or "PC." This opposition, the resistance they both offer and elicit, has turned them into what Iovănel befittingly calls, after Stanisław Lem, "resistance points" (273).

These are existential and discursive "nodes" that remind one of Jacques Lacan's *points de capiton* ("quilting" or "anchoring points").[33] In them, the social and the literary take shape concomitantly and inseparably from one another, stabilizing a signified reality (e. g., "family") into an ideologically dominant and historically resilient signifier (say, "officially recognized heterosexual couple"). The unyoking of these two faces of a social and semiotic unit becomes arduous and even risky business, and thus writers, whether they like it or not, must write through—and scarcely around, rarely circumventing—such ossifying encodings of meaning and collective mentality. As in Object-Oriented Ontology, these "things" are materially dense and unyielding, prove impossible to transcend, and so poets and novelists write with the very ink of these reified representations, with this preexistent and demanding thematics of personal and public identity. As they do so, they show their true political colors. The last portion of the second part surveys this volatile and contentious chromatics on both sides of the Communist/postcommunist rift, giving credit to pre- and post-1990 literature where credit is due (Angela Marinescu, Cârneci, Lefter, and closer to us, Elena Vlădăreanu and, partly, Mihaela Miroiu) or critiquing (Cărtărescu, critics like Dan C. Mihăilescu, Lavric, and many others, including Radu Aldulescu). Chapter 8 is not only a stepping-stone to what follows next but also a critical resistance point itself. Its foci are basically the "sluices" of the investigative energies running through the *History* and powering its evental operations. The entire volume hinges in fact on the chapter's case for a literary realism of immediate concern and against evasive if elaborate style, self-gazing metalanguage, fatuous parody, repetitiveness, and cliché. Once this argument has been laid down, the book can then pivot on it and wield it historically by chronicling in detail the development of fiction and poetry after 1990.

This ensures that the same criteria of analysis and assessment are at work in parts three and four. This also is, logically, why many of the writers surfing the "nineteen eightist" and "nineteen ninetist" waves come up short in Iovănel's account especially once we have crossed into the new millennium—into the heart of the contemporary, that is. As in the United States, if the 1990s are transitional in a way that can make aesthetic exhaustion and replenishment look like one another for a while, this ambiguity clears out after 2000. The post-2000/post-September 11, 2001 is the interval in which, in Romania, across the Atlantic, and elsewhere in the world, the post-Cold War cultural system settles into a more specific and recognizable configuration of form and theme. This configuration is the postmillennial and is farther and farther removed from postmodernism, which loses steam faster and faster, takes his place alongside other historical categories, but survives in post-postmodern practices that, much like postmodernism in its own time, rejig techniques of the past. To give a quick example, a postmodern luminary like John Ashbery lives on in a hypermetafictional but post-ironic, definitely post-postmodern poet and novelist such as Ben Lerner, in whose work the proverbial realistic mirror carried down a country road and the convex mirror of narrative self-scrutiny are no longer at loggerheads. Likewise, the anti-neoliberal, anti-globalist, feminist, racial, ecological, non-human, sub- and mass cultural, and other urgent stances and issues are not at odds with the new media in which they are treated and the popular genres they draw on, whether it is the digital-born prose of Steve Tomasula, fiction that mimics blogs, texting, and e-mail, as in Jennifer Egan and Joshua Cohen, or Colson Whitehead's zombie novel *Zone One* (2011). All this is at once experimental and realistic, self-conscious formally and committed politically, descriptive and normative. The aesthetic is the very interface of all these factors and aspects. It is baked into form, and so it cannot be peeled off critically, dealt with separately, and so "enjoyed." Consequently, the ideological reading of this kind of literature becomes a post-formalism, a political formalism. True, literature is not paraphrasable, but ideology is not a paraphrase; it is embedded in expression.

I have just described, very briefly, developments that run

parallel in American, British, Romanian, and other national literatures. They become more and more pronounced after 2000, so much so that the twilight postmodernism of Jonathan Lethem, Dave Eggers, Mark Leyner, Dobrescu, Iustin Panţa, Simona Popescu, and Cristian Popescu—whose works are both postmodern and more existentially charged—tips over into viscerally autofictional, brutally authentic, socially alert, posthumanly inquisitive, and new-media-savvy postmillennial literature. To answer Baghiu's key question, which Iovănel quotes in his first footnote (9), the big fault line of the post-World War II years remains the one separating the 1980s and the 1990s, in Romania and abroad. But one cannot rule out that by the time the *History*'s new edition will come out, the post-2000 decades may well be the new "new contemporary." This would be a consequence of postmillennial literary radicalism, the evental effect of mutations that, also with Baghiu's language, may make the early 1990s look in retrospect more like a bend in the river of literary history than a watershed, a "rupture"; the end of a literary era, not the birth of a new one.

The breakpoint—the event—would have been anticipated by writers across recent generations. I write "breakpoint," but again, this does not look, at this juncture at least, as a clean break. Afterall, there is hardly any in cultural history, and post-2000 continuities exist too. Nonetheless, the shift, still underway, is dramatic, and its cultural dominant and main vehicle are, as Iovănel shows, postmillennial. Its main critics and theorists are postmillennial also. They are those who felt early on the same postmodern fatigue sensed and resented elsewhere as well and have articulated in response critiques not only of postmodernism but also of broader periods and movements and entrenched aesthetic and political positions in Romanian literary culture. The portion chapter 6 sets aside for the "2000 Generation" of critics (230-242) proves, however, that Iovănel remains levelheaded and realistic when writing on his own generation, coworkers, and even friends. Thus, he rightly argues that "[Andrei] Terian has been the most important actor of the system of Romanian literary criticism since 1989" in that, more than anybody else, he anticipates and works to enable the profession's long-overdue transition to post-journalistic, methodologically up-to-date, and internationally competitive modes (235). Nor does Iovănel sweep under the rug Paul Cernat's opportunistic conservatism. Well weighed, the contrast between the two is eloquent: where one can already boast accomplishments whose impact remain unrivaled in recent decades, the other keeps cranking out patrimonial "obituaries" (232) on Facebook and in outfits like *Caiete critice*.

The rise of postmillennialism is, then, no triumphal march. The implosion of Marcel Ianuş's career is another pitiful setback, and Iovănel is aware of it. Such special cases aside, the new criticism, fiction, and poetry published after 2000 by Dumitru, Adriana Stan, Andreea Mironescu, Doris Mironescu, Alex Goldiş, Cosmin Borza, Adrian Schiop, Florin Chirculescu, Lavinia Braniştе, Dan Lungu, Alexandru Vakulovski, Răzvan Rădulescu, Filip Florian, Radu Pavel Gheo, Vlădăreanu, Dan Sociu, and Ruxandra Novac, to list but a few, tell us that a new way of thinking about literature and of doing it has reached critical mass and a whole new literary paradigm is taking hold. Whenever we bring up contemporary Romanian literature, the name of the elephant in the room may still be Cărtărescu, but as *Nu striga niciodată ajutor*, his latest poetry book (2020), attests, even he pays attention to what has been going on: the spread of an aesthetic of urgency, an aesthetic of interjections rather than winks, one that is realistic, autobiographical, and self-interrogative in a responsible and even masochistic way, anarchistically neo-avant-garde in its prosaic and obscene inflections, outraged by the misery of individual bodies and the precariat of the body politic alike, performing at high level in mainstream literature and outshining most of what has been done before in popular genres such as sci fi, fantasy, the policier, and children and young-adult fiction. Iovănel is the consummate expert on this "paraliterature," which, in chapter 13 and other places in the *History*, gets more play than in any other Romanian book of the sort. This is just one of those decisions and steps that, once taken, change not only the literary-historical contract but also how Iovănel reads and how his own readers may have to read a certain book, an author or group of authors, or a particular text category.

Such revaluations of and fresh hypotheses and questions about contemporary Romanian literature and Romanian literature at large abound in the *History*. Most are formulated expressis verbis; others can be inferred. I have already alluded to a couple, but, in closing, I want to reiterate some of those here, along with a few new ones. My enumeration follows chronology mostly. Thus, we find out (better later than never), Gherea is our first modern critic, not Maiorescu; the literature of the 1950s and 1960s, Socialist Realism included, and certainly its "ruralist" branch, is richer and more realistic than we think; Socialist Realism does not end circa mid-1960s either—it keeps going, in the perversely cultural and political style of late Communism, into the 1980s and morphs into the likes of Alexandru Ivasiuc and Augustin Buzura, into what such writers can and do write and into what they cannot write nor publish; "capitalist realism" connects, therefore, with Socialist Realism more than with the realism of the 1970s and 1980s, picking up, after a fashion, where the 1950s left off; in a sense, they never did completely, for better (critics like Ion Vitner are not just the monsters we were taught they had been) *and* worse (the 1980s extend Romanian Stalinism and its aesthetics into the late twentieth century); more interesting and perhaps superior to writers like Nicolae Breban were genre specialists such as Radu Tudoran, whose stunning realist novels and widely popular travel romances, including his early *An Eastern Port* [1941], remain grossly underread; oddballs such as Ion Gheorghe or Marian Popa may well have to be revisited as well: one, for his cultural and political relevance, on which Iovănel rightfully dwells; the other, for his experimental literature and comparative work, even though his sinister anti-Semitism and pro-Eugen Barbu stance are equally unforgettable (and unforgivable); further, Vlădăreanu may detest Florin Iaru, but what about an *als ob* literary world in which Iaru or, better yet, Mariana Marin publishes (and therefore writes) whatever

he or she wants? What would their works look like? Or, vice versa, a world in which Vlădăreanu and Branişte are censored by actual, political censors? How "realistic" could they be in it? And would they learn in such a parallel universe just how political 1980s postmodernism could afford to appear? The limitations imposed on such self-expression would perhaps become clearer. Whatever the critical benefits of this hypothetical exercise, would they justify what has been essentially the abandoning of the postmodern project by the 1980s writers and critics? While Lefter has never given up on his postmodern reformism and political progressivism, most Romanian postmodern writers and critics, Iovănel remarks, have become by now, dismayingly enough, conservative and worse or have given up the business of literature and criticism altogether. But is the surprising conservatism of Romanian postmodernism a fluke or a historical symptom, a moment in a vaster sequence? At one end, ours, Cernat and his cybereulogies, as mentioned above. At the other, most writers and critics of the 1960s are conservative too, some of them charmingly so, others not so much; conservative in the extreme are, not despite their moth-eaten aesthetic fixation but because of it, most of the mythical figures of 1970s-1980s Romanian-American academic diaspora; this helps understand both why the works of Virgil Nemoianu, Mihai Spăriosu, and even Matei Călinescu have not been part of the conversation in literary and cultural studies in the United States since—interestingly enough—the early 1990s and also why their uncritical embalming continues in Romania alongside the earlier triad of Mircea Eliade-Eugène Ionesco-Emil Cioran.

The most untrue thing one could say about the *History* is probably that Romanian literary diaspora does not get a fair shake in it. There is a reason, after all, that the book's last part is "Transnational Specificity." To be sure, there is more than the anti-Călinescu barb to this finale. In the last chapters, Iovănel one more time works post-1990 Romanian literature into the world context to which, after the Cold War, it firmly belongs. Cărtărescu is once more present here, with fiction and nonfiction, and so are many others, including his co-generational buddy, Matei Vişniec, as well as Norman Manea, Andrei Codrescu, and—most notably, as far as I am concerned—post-2000 young poets who, as Iovănel quotes Cernat's observation, "have related massively, if not exclusively, to external cultural models" (667). Coming full circle, transnationalism has become the DNA of national literature and is recognized as such. It took, as I have been contending, a wholesale rewriting of the Romanian critical contract to get here.

Notes:

1. This article is part of the special-focus issue devoted by *Transilvania* to Mihai Iovănel's *History of Contemporary Romanian Literature: 1990-2020* (Iași, Romania: Polirom, 2021). All *History* references in my essay are to this edition. An abridged version of this text was videodelivered as a keynote at the annual colloquium of the Romanian Association of General and Comparative Literature held at Transylvania University of Braşov, Romania, on July 15, 2021.
2. One such podcast is Mihai Iovănel with Dinu Guțu and Costi Rogozanu, "Podcast TLTXT #2/ 'A scris Iovănel despre mine?' Cu Mihai Iovănel," May 10, 2021. https://tltxt.ro/articol/podcast-mihaiiovanel/ (accessed May 27, 2021).
3. Iovănel himself makes it clear that the *History*'s primary objective is to explain the "system" of contemporary Romanian literature rather than promote certain authors over others. See "*Istoria* mea este interesată mai curând de explicarea unui sistem, decât de canonizarea unor autori," interview by Mircea Pricăjean, in *Familia*, July 5, 2021, available at https://revistafamilia.ro/?p=2461 (accessed July 5, 2021).
4. On Deleuze, *Logique du sens*, and the event "as a kind of singularity that fundamentally transforms what is going on," see Clayton Crockett, "Event," in *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Literary and Cultural Theory*, ed. Jeffrey R. Di Leo (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), 480.
5. Other such titles worth mentioning are recent individual and collective books by Teodora Dumitru, Adriana Stan, Alex Goldiș, Ștefan Baghiu, Alexandru Matei, and Andrei Terian, including the latter's coedited volume *Romanian Literature as World Literature* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2018). These critics are associated with the Păltiniș Critical Theory Institute, of which Iovănel is also a prominent member and where *Romanian Literature as World Literature* and its sequel of sorts, *Theory in the "Post" Era: A Vocabulary for the Twenty-First-Century Conceptual Commons* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2021), coedited by Matei, Terian, and myself, have been workshopped. Iovănel has contributed to both and recognizes the Institute in the *History* (15).
6. This is a suggestion made, in fact, by Mihai Iovănel himself. See his recent interview with Vasile Ernu "Probabil că nu avem autori contemporani de anvergura lui Tudor Arghezi. Se fac copywriters ori dezvoltă scenarii pentru jocuri video," May 12, 2021, 15:02. *Libertatea.ro*. https://www.libertatea.ro/lifestyle/interviu-istoricul-literar-mihai-iovanel-3518689 (accessed May 28, 2021).
7. Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, translated by Oliver Feltham (London: Continuum, 2005), 175.
8. Alain Badiou with Fabien Tarby, *Philosophy and the Event*, translated by Louise Burchill (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2013), 69-70.
9. Badiou, *Being and Event*, 175.
10. Jacques Derrida dwells on the distinction in the famous, itself paradigm-changing 1966 Johns Hopkins lecture "La structure, le signe et le jeu dans le discours des sciences humaines." See Jacques Derrida, *L'écriture et la différence* (Paris: Seuil, 1979), 418.
11. Notably, the *History*'s "Introductory Note" starts out with a tribute to Eugen Lovinescu (9).
12. The considerations on the "structuralist event" open Derrida's "La structure, le signe et le jeu dans le discours des sciences humaines" (*L'écriture et la difference*, 409).
13. Badiou with Tarby, *Philosophy and the Event*, 68.

14. Ulrich Beck talks about "methodological nationalism" in "Toward a New Critical Theory with a Cosmopolitan Intent," a piece published in *Constellations* 10. 4 (2003): 453–68. He develops a critique of this concept across a number of journal articles and book chapters. Anthony Giddens and Herminio Martins have done the same.
15. Paul Jay, *Global Matters: The Transnational Turn in Literary Studies* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010).
16. Mario Klarer, *A Short Literary History of the United States* (London: Routledge, 2013).
17. Richard Gray, *A Brief History of American Literature* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011).
18. Richard Gray, *A History of American Literature*. 2nd ed. (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012).
19. I have made and illustrated this argument throughout my recent work, including *The Planetary Turn: Relationality and Geoaesthetics in the Twenty-First Century*, Amy J. Elias and Christian Moraru, eds. (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2015), and *Reading for the Planet: Toward a Geomethodology* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2015).
20. I have developed some of these ideas, among other places, in "*Welt*literature? American Literature after Territorialism: Manifesto for a Twenty-First-Century Critical Agenda," a chapter of *American Literature as World Literature*, ed. Jeffrey R. Di Leo (New York: Bloomsbury, 2018), 127-147.
21. On the *History*'s "realism," also see Adriana Stan's essay in this issue. Adriana Stan, "Arheologii ale prezentului în *Istoria literaturii române contemporane: 1990-2020*," *Transilvania*, no. 7-8 (2021): 61-66.
22. Badiou with Tarby, *Philosophy and the Event*, 68.
23. I touch on Romanian postmodernism as an incomplete project in an article whose title, deliberately hyperbolic, is "*Noi* nu am fost niciodată postmoderni. Despre alfabetizarea critică" (*We* Have Never Been Postmodern: On Critical Literacy). The essay was published in *Vatra* 6-7 (June-July 2018): 86–88 (translated by Alex Ciorogar).
24. I am referring to Antoine Compagnon, *Les antimodernes de Joseph de Maistre à Roland Barthes* (Paris: Gallimard, 2005). Not only does Compagnon purport to "decontaminate" in his book entire cohorts of stick-in-the-muds, Ancien Régime nostalgists, and outright reactionaries by discussing them "aesthetically," as Iovănel aptly observes (232), but the French critic also chalks up single-mindedly to traditionalism and conservatism authors whose writing was, *qua* writing and literary-theoretical impact, front and center to the modernist revolution and even later, radical innovations. Roland Barthes is a case in point.
25. As Ştefan Baghiu notes in an article also featured by this issue of *Transilvania*, Marxists of the more dyed-in-the-wool type have called Iovănel's Marxism skin-deep. The reservations they have expressed are worth discussing, and Baghiu opens that discussion. Otherwise, we need to realize that such critiques themselves (and their own language too) are vulnerable to co-optation and "commodification," and that there will always be space left to the left of the left to critique said critiques. See Ştefan Baghiu, "Critica ideologică în epoca limbajului administrativ de stânga: o istorie New Left a literaturii române contemporane," *Transilvania*, no. 7-8 (2021): 80–89.
26. I have discussed the decline of the postmodern and the dawn of the "new contemporary" in a number of books, articles, and presentations, most recently in "Periodization," an essay included in *The Encyclopedia of American Fiction, 1980-2020*, eds. Patrick O'Donnell, Stephen J. Burn, and Lesley Larkin (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2021; forthcoming), and in "Periodization, Theory, and the Making of the Contemporary," a keynote videodelivered at the "When Is Theory? Shifts of Time Frame in Contemporary Literary Studies" International Conference, Babes-Bolyai University, Cluj, Romania, on April 15, 2021.
27. See Teodora Dumitru, "Gaming the World-System: Creativity, Politics, and Beat Influence in the Poetry of the 1980s Generation," in *Romanian Literature as World Literature*, eds. Mircea Martin, Christian Moraru, and Andrei Terian (New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2018), 271–287.
28. See Mihai Iovănel, "NEOCRITIQUE: Sherlock Holmes Investigates Literature," in *Theory in the "Post" Era: A Vocabulary for the Twenty-First-Century Conceptual Commons*, eds. Alexandru Matei, Christian Moraru, and Andrei Terian (New York: Bloomsbury, 2021), 251–266.
29. This is a reference to Mircea Martin's essay "D'un postmodernisme sans rivages et d'un postmodernisme sans postmodernité," *Euresis: Cahiers Roumains d'Études littéraires et culturelles*, nos. 1–4 (2009): 11–22.
30. On the soundness of Iovănel's reading of Cărtărescu in the *History*, as well as on Cărtărescu's past animosity toward the critic, see Costi Rogozanu's opinion article "Istoria lui Iovănel, o carte pe care trebuie s-o ai, deşi n-ai mai citit nimic de 100 de ani" in *Libertatea*, July 4th, 2021, available at https://www.libertatea.ro/opinii/istoria-lui-iovanel-o-carte-pe-care-trebuie-s-o-ai-desi-n-ai-mai-citit-nimic-de-100-de-ani-3631336 (accessed July 4, 2021).
31. Mihai Iovănel, *Roman poliţist* (Cluj-Napoca: Tact, 2015).
32. See Iulia Popovici's analysis in "Sorin Lavric sau neolegionarismul în vorbe aurite." *Observator cultural* 1044, December 17, 2020. https://www.observatorcultural.ro/-articol/sorin-lavric-sau-neolegionarismul-in-vorbe-aurite/ (accessed July 2, 2021).
33. Lacan talks about *points de capiton* in *The Seminar. Book III. The Psychoses, 1955-57*. A useful overview of the concept in Lacan is available in Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1997), 149.

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