

PECULIARITIES AND INTERFERENCES OF THE DUNĂREA DE JOS LITERATURE

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Abstract

Evolution of the Romanian literary phenomenon, viewed both in its completeness and at province level, described in the new cultural press, developed immediately after December 1989, coincided with the first ample and real manifestation of the freedom of expression, materialized in the appearance of new means of media communication: one one side - the social-political, on the other - the literary press.

As known, immediately after 1989, the Romanian literary life witnessed a tempestuous restructuration process, the new paradigm involving in itself a whole series of contradictions, conflictual situations, controversies, polarization of various theories, models and tendencies, some of them extremely virulent and impetuous, such as, for example, the war of cultural reconsiderations.

In December 1989, few of the writers of Galați were recognized as really important at national level, each of them having succeeded, until then, in publishing one or more of books at Publishing Houses of Iași and **București**. What happened immediately after the abolition of the restrictive and drastic mechanisms of ideological censorship may be considered as an authentic local literary revolution, manifested at all levels of expression, starting with literary productions up to various complementary, yet stimulating forms of publication.

Keywords: *literature, Dunărea de Jos, Galați, Brăila, Tulcea, beginning of the XXIth century.*

An analysis – such as the present one - devoted to the amplitude, specificity and interferences of the literary phenomenon manifested within a geographical area of maximum visibility over the whole Romanian area may be viewed as equally venturesome and necessary, if considering both its complexity and relevance as part of a more vast attempt at realizing the paradigm of Romanian literature evolution in latest decades. Mention should be made from the very beginning that study of the literature of Dunărea de Jos appears as a priority at local level, not from strictly epistemological considerations, but in relation with the ample, dynamic, unforeseeable,

yet significant progress recorded in the literary creation of the Galați zone in the first quarter of the XXIth century, in close correlation, obviously, both with the local, rich and of large national resonance tradition, and with the ever generous perspectives that may be anticipated.

In general terms, the literature of Dunărea de Jos might be assumed at macro-zonal level, which means consideration, in the present analysis, of the neighbouring town of Brăila, a most specific area, which gave great names in the field, such as those of Panait Istrati, Nae Ionescu, Mihail Sebastian, Fănuș Neagu, as well as of the small towns of Tulcea and especially Sulina, made famous by Jean Bart, who, due to the years spent in Galați, is now claimed as part of the local literature. In an even larger perspective appreciates the situation the literary historian and critic Viorel Coman of Brăila, who, in a vast study (Coman, 2011), analyzes an even more extended space, including the famous Bărăgan, considering the literature written in these regions as part of a Balkanic literary canon, comprising not less than ten countries and comparing it, at least as to its potential, to the Latin-American one. However, our study will refer strictly to the spatiality circumscribed to the town and county of Galați, considered first of all as the scene of some dynamic events of special importance for both the local history and the whole Romania and Romanian spirituality.

The regions of Galați, or of Covurluiului, as it was called in the old administrative organization, were soon to be imposed in the modern epoch, first of all by the busy economic and social-political life, due to the privileged position of maritime harbour on the Danube, at the border between the two Romanian Principalities, which

conferred to them a special statute, not only at national level after the Union of 1859, but also at European and international level, due to the interest manifested by the great powers in fluvial navigation, which assured connections, through the Black Sea, with the whole world. With the creation of the Danube European Commission, with its headquarters at Galați, the town became a sort of European capital, the most representative countries of the continent and of the world opening here consulates of their own, thus placing the town on the strategic map of the great commercial and cultural initiatives.

Quite naturally, the economic boom (as, in parallels with the development of the harbour, several industries of national importance were transferred here, firstly naval constructions and metallurgy) was gradually accompanied by extended flourishing at all levels of the suprastructure, spiritual life, theater, music, plastic arts, press and literature. In this way, Galați becomes a cosmopolite town, a free metropole, once having obtained the Porto Franco status, with real opening towards the Occident and with a remarkable cultural life, within which literature occupied a well-defined position. Synthetically, this is the socio-economic context in which this literature flourished and, even if not having attained the high artistic level of the great university centers, such as Iași, Cluj, Timișoara, București, it was recognized by its consistency, variety and, last but not least, performance and national relevance.

Analyzed in a previous paper (Zanfir, 2013) were the main characteristics of the literary writings of Galați in the moment of the revolution of 1989, when the region was in possession of a latent, yet ascending literary potential, numerous authentic talents, whose progress will be manifested as soon as favourable historical conditions would appear. An intense literary turmoil was manifested in the first years, mainly in the first decade of post-Decembrist freedom, so that the newly emerging generations of writers, the unprecedented outburst of the local editorial production, of all mass media means, as well as reconsideration, on the basis of new, non-restrictive criteria of the literature produced before the second World War and of the writings of the communist period, led to a new, unitary,

equally diachronic and synchronic, coherent and expressive vision upon the local literary phenomenon. The year 1990 was coming, at Galați, with considerable stability and consistency, substantiated on a literary tradition represented by remarkable figures in the history of the Romanian literature, as early as the XVIIIth century, beginning with the old Costache Conache followed, in the XIXth century, by Costache Negri, Gheorghe Baronzi, Grigore Ventura, Vasile Alexandrescu Urechia, a great founder of cultural institutions, Calistrat Hogaș, Sofia Nădejde, Paul Bujor, Spiridon Popescu, Constantin Z. Buzdugan, Jean Bart, Șt. O. Iosif, Ion Petrovici, Dimitrie Anghel, Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu, Ștefan Petică, Nicolae Dunăreanu, Vasile Pârvan, Tudor Pamfile, Dimitrie Cuclin, Barbu Nemțeanu, Victor Papilian, Victor Ion Popa, Iosif Cassian-Mătășaru (the father of poetess Nina Cassian) and, later on, by the impressive number of writers, busily active in all literary genders, who marked the tumultuous XXth century.

The evolution of the Romanian literary phenomenon, taken as a whole and at regional level, was best reflected in the new cultural press, issued as early as December 1989, which was the first plenary and efficient manifestation of the freedom of expression, in parallels with the occurrence of the new communication media: the social-political press - on one side, the literary press - on the other. A systematic and profound investigation of such phenomena was the topic of a previous work (Zanfir, 2012), elaborated as an integrative vision, the peripheric literary zones being discussed only in relation with certain relevant interferences, however, it is exactly with this totalitary, systemic and organic perspective that approaching of the local problems of the Dunărea de Jos region benefited not only from a correct starting point but also from an adequate methodology. As known, immediately after 1989, the Romanian literary life witnessed an ample restructuration process, modification of the existing paradigm bringing about a whole series of - actually subjective - contradictions, conflictual situations, controversies, polarizations of various theories, models and tendencies, some of them extremely virulent and impetuous, such as, for example the war of cultural reconsiderations.

From the very beginning, reputed critics made mention not only of the difficulty to be faced with such an approach, but also of the necessity of substantiating an adequate investigative methodology. Asking himself, quite normally, what is to become the Romanian literature in post-communism, the critic Ion Simuț formulates some fundamental questions: "How should one understand the condition of Romanian literature in post-December times? Where are the disorders coming from? What's changed? What specific tendencies did appear? How can one plot the diagram of the actual aesthetic tensions and how can one describe the tectonics of the literary genera and of their values, without approaching the specific aspects of the prose, poetry, dramaturgy, criticism or literary history?" (Simuț, 2007)

Reformulated at the level of literary provinces, these questions may offer answers and reveal much more dramatic realities than at national level, if considering the preconceived ideas, the old-established practices and tendencies of exaggerating the role of the Center to the obvious detriment of the Margin, the example of Galați, together with the whole area of Dunărea de Jos, being edifying in this respect. In December 1989, few writers of national recognition were living at Galați: Ion Trandafir, Theodor Parapiru, Constantin Vremuleț, Viorel Dinescu, Dan Plăeșu, Katia Nanu, Paul Sân-Petru, Simon Ajarescu, Sterian Vicol, Ion Chiric, Corneliu Antoniu, Apostol Gurău, Coriolan Păunescu, Mircea Ionescu, Tudorel Oancea, each of them having one or more books issued at Publishing Houses of Iași and București. What happened after the abolition of the restrictive, rigid mechanisms of the ideological censorship may be characterized as an authentic local literary revolution, manifested at all levels of expression, starting with literary productions up to various complementary, yet stimulating forms of publication. Several literary publications and Publishing Houses appear one after another – beginning with the Porto-Franco press trust, a company having taken over the structures of the state Printing House of Galați – a real première in a town in which private institutions had been absent for more than four decades. In this way, the antebelic tradition – when the Danubian town was reputed by its numerous publications,

Publishing Houses, fashionable circles and literary and cultural organizations – was happily resumed.

This type of "zero moment", nourishing the extremely generous illusion of a wholly unrestricted freedom, produced an enthusiasm, effervescence and emulation never imagined until then, as well as a general bewilderment, characteristic to any abrupt change of political system. "At last, any illusion is permitted" – wrote Andrei Pleșu in the first number of the new *România literară*, on January 6, 1990, the whole country witnessing a literary rebirth which evolved in parallels with the society, during the long transition to follow. In this context, the main issue is to establish the role played by the literary province in this ample movement of canonic redefinition and transformation, with special reference to the literary Galați, to the local and national contribution brought by this all-embracing process. More than 26 years later, the literature of Dunărea de Jos, that may be already defined as to its main characteristics, systematization and conceptualization tendencies, more and more intensely and persuasively manifested in the last decade, is relevant in this respect.

First of all, mention should be made of the general emancipation and re-establishment tendency of the literary province *versus* the center, a general phenomenon manifested in specific forms, yet possessing some common characteristics, in various parts of the country, known in the past as simple spaces from where the writers were absorbed by the élite features and exclusivism of the Capital or, similarly with the postwar period, of the mirage of the strange land, which actually produced a rich literature of the exile. Quite naturally, and becoming more and more visible, the phenomenon came to be explained by the representatives of the province themselves, and not by the theoreticians of the Center, who, in most of the cases, deliberately ignore the impressive, increasing literary value of these territories. Among the "provincials" with a rich literary work, mention should be made of Theodor Codreanu from the town of Huși, a reputed critic, literary historian and theoretician, who gave a most exact definition of such literary realities: "We are nowadays witnessing, in our culture, the disappearance of

the "complex of the provincial" as opposed to the "center", as focuses of authentic culture are now manifested in various zones of the country, in numerous cases superior to those of - for example - București which, traditionally, used to suck in the talented representatives of the province. (...) When such local values attain a certain degree of crystallization, going beyond the strict provincial interest, they generate the need of *historicization* of the phenomena of some period as, for example, the one of the latest decades. This explains the elaboration of *dictionaries* of the personalities of a county, the monographic works dedicated to cultural institutions or to reputed personalities and, why not, even local cultural *histories*." (Codreanu, 2012) This need of "historicization" is explained not only by the need of identity and recognition, but also by the national need of a coherent turning to good account of the regional emancipations, as, to cite Adrian Alui Gheorghe, non-observance of the whole and the lack of integration of parts may cause severe disturbances: "Paradoxically, we are now having a rich, living literature, yet wholly unknown in Romania. Under such circumstances, any hierarchization tendency is false. What do Moldavians know about the books published in Banat? What do Oltenians know about the volumes issued in Maramureș? Nothing. Or almost nothing. The cultural dialogue inside Romania is fractured and incoherent. I am absolutely convinced that, if, starting with tomorrow, none of the contemporary Romanian writers will accept to publish in Romania, no institution of the state will react in any way, as such a fact would remain even unobserved. And this is because writers are neither miners nor subway workers (an allusion to the revendicative movements of some social categories with distinct identity and major visibility, n.n.)" (Alui Gheorghe, 2012)

The post-December revitalization of the literature produced at Dunărea de Jos was based on a few movements and tendencies indicated by either propensity of some new institutional forms, or individual initiatives, also institutionalized in time, and becoming increasingly notorious on both local and national level. The first of them determined the "Porto-Franco phenomenon", starting with the new

press trust with the same name which, grafted on the former state printing house (one of the greatest and most modern institutions of the country in that moment), apart from a newspaper and some niche publications, offered to the local literary movement a Publishing House with an exceptional evolution on the new book market, as well as a literary magazine, the first one of this orientation in Galați, after more than 40 years. The few old writers grouped around this trust and, especially, around the *Porto-Franco* Publishing House and magazine became, within only a few years, (very) well-known in the country, in parallels with their institutional organization, by the creation of the "C. Negri" Society of Writers, reuniting members not only from Galați, but also from the neighbouring districts, having a well-established statute, stipulating even the introduction of a literary embossed press, thus liable of becoming a serious competitor of the Union of Writers of Romania (USR). The reaction of the central institution was a prompt one, in support of the personal initiative of the poet Corneliu Antoniu, of launching a second literary magazine at Galați, *Antares*, a publication issued under the aegis of USR. Later on, by the efforts of the same poet, the publication gave rise to new institutional forms, among which special mention should be made of the *Antares International Festival of Literature*, taking place each year at Galați, Brăila, Tulcea and Sulina (the whole Dunărea de Jos area!), bringing together distinguished participants and with a special impact upon the local cultural life. The plenary expression of the national recognition of the value of such a literary movement is nevertheless represented by the creation, by the efforts of the same Corneliu Antoniu, of the South-East Branch of USR, at Galați, including members from a much larger zone, which placed the writers of Dunărea de Jos and the town of Galați on the map of the writing centers of Romania.

The third literary movement, with a special impact in bringing together the new tendencies manifested in the evolution of the local literary phenomenon was initiated by the „V.A. Urechia” Districtual Library which, supported by the local administration, launched an ample manifestation of forms and specific means for promoting the local literature, under the new name of *Axis*

Libri, to be soon transformed into a brand, a well-known emblem of national representation of the actual cultural potential of Galați and of the entire Dunărea de Jos area. Unlike some previous movements, „Axis Libri” had in view, from the very beginning, incorporation in a unitary system of all essential aspects which determine, produce and support the book as a superior form of scientific, literary and artistic communication, creating a cultural magazine, a Publishing House, a literary circle, as well as a national festival of the book, by now at its 8th edition. The novelty brought about by the *Axis Libri* cultural phenomenon was a firm rejection of exclusivism and of cultural isolation, a total freedom of communication with the whole country, with the great cultural centers, and also with the Romanians living beyond the borders of the country. The „Axis Libri” Literary Circle – the weekly institutional form of gathering writers of various ages, orientations and forms of association – organized, from its very creation, meetings with important writers of București, Iași, Cluj, Timișoara, Constanța, Brăila, Buzău, Focșani, Chișinău, Cernăuți, while also sending its main representatives at the literary sessions organized at Dunărea de Jos. In most of the cases, both the Circle and the book festival were organized in collaboration with the „C. Negri” Writers Society – the South-East Branch of US, with the other literary clubs, cultural magazines and local groups of writers, in spite of the quite frequent dissensions and divergent interests manifested among them. The most representative example of cooperation around the great idea of an authentic literature might be represented by the manner in which „Axis Libri” worked together with the South-East Branch of USR in the realization of the „A”-*Antares - Axis Libri* journal of theory, literary history and criticism, an unique publication in the cultural background of the province – which has already arrived at its 7th issue.

Several tendencies towards synthetisation and structuring of a rich biobibliographical material or, in a different plan, towards the application of some superior forms of analysis and conceptualization, were also materialized in other important initiatives, as well. In this respect, surprising and welcome by the local and national literary critic movement was the book

of Viorel Dinescu, *Socratic dialogues* (Dinescu, 2010), an ample literary inquiry dedicated to most urgent themes of contemporary Romanian literature, recording the opinions of some reputed writers of Galați, of the country and of the Romanian territories beyond the present borders. Aiming mainly at attaining a national horizon of understanding and valorisation, yet from the position of the Dunărea de Jos writer, poetess Angela Baciu also published several books containing interviews with contemporary Romanian men-of-letters. Worth mentioning are also the volumes of interviews of Ghiță Nazare, which, even if not all devoted to the literary world, open new directions on the most actual themes of the Romanian literature at Dunărea de Jos. Elaborated at high levels of subtle analysis and literary intuition, the volumes of essays signed by writers of Galați contribute, in their turn, to the accomplishment of a necessary and ample work of synthetization and deep systemic analysis. In the year 2015, a chronicle published in *Convorbiri literare* discusses the book of essays of Ion Manea, *Călimara cu pixeli (The inkpot with pixels)*, a volume attempting at outlining the actual stage of the evolution of literature, against the background of the decline of Gutenberg Galaxy, and of the quasi-generalized insurrection of the pixel era (Zanfîr, 2015), of digitalization.

Again as a manifestation of the need of identity and national relevance, a series of important actions aimed at offering a conceptual synthesis of the actual condition of literature at Dunărea de Jos has been organized. By now, it goes without saying that, at national level, Galați has entered the cultural circuit with several far-reaching works, aimed at selecting and extracting, out of the whole phenomenology of the post-December Romanian writings, exactly the characteristics, tendencies and orientations capable of defining, as exactly as possible, the new cultural profile of the area. The first symptom of this process of self-definition of literary identity came with the publication of the first studies of local literary criticism and history elaborated by representatives of various generation, the most important names to be mentioned being those of Viorel Ștefănescu, author of two important volumes, *Filografii (Philographies)*, Arteuro Publishing House, Galați,

2005 and *Portretul scriiturii (The Portrait of Writing)*, Publishing House of Antares Cultural Foundation, Galați, 2009, A. G. Secară, who wrote *Scriitori gălățeni pe înțelesul tuturor (Writers of Galați for everybody)*, Axis Libri Publishing House, Galați, 2009, Ioan Toderiță, *Revelația și relevanța textului literar. Scriitori gălățeni contemporani (Revelation and relevance of the literary text. Contemporary writers of Galați)*, Publishing House of the Dunărea de Jos Cultural Center, Galați, 2011 and Vasile Ghica, *Pe meridianele criticii literare (Meridians of literary criticism)*, Grapho Press Publishing House, Tecuci, 2015, and Ionel Necula, author of numerous volumes devoted to writers of Galați and Tecuci. However, the most eloquent literary contribution of Dunărea de Jos remains „The encyclopaedic dictionary of famous sayings” of Theodor Parapiru, a monumental study including all great maxims of the world, explaining their origin and attempting at establishing their exact meaning for universal knowledge. The last edition – the fourth – of the Dictionary comes to include one thousand famous sayings, which obviously requires prolonged reading, patience, a certain level of training and peace of mind. We expect that this work of Theodor Parapiru will be awarded by the Romanian Academy. The necessary criticism of such works provided landmarks for the evolution of the Dunărea de Jos literature under the new socio-historically determined conditions, which is however not sufficient for drawing the general and significative picture expected by any literature, a desideratum to be gradually accomplished by further actions and by the realization of far-reaching, complex and noticeable projects.

A first important step was represented by the issuing, in the year 2013, at *Convorbiri literare* Publishing House of Iași, of a volume meant at opening a new evolutive stage, namely the synthesis and valorisation of the local literary potential at the level of the whole national cultural space (Zanfir, 2013). After the opening chapters, devoted to the essential issues of the specific character of the literary phenomenon of Galați, e.g., „The markers of the opening. The background and potential of cultural manifestations at Galați”, „Zonal and national specificity. In quest of identity”, „Accomplishments and limitations. Waiting for local leaders”, „Individualities, groups and divergent opinions. Literary and cultural

creations”, pages 83-272 include a first dictionary of writers of Galați of all times, listing the names of the most important local writers, from early beginnings up to now. The town of Galați was thus putting forth, for the first time, information on its men-of-letters, their main biographic data, their books, yet making no reference to the universe of their works, even if, now and then, few critical, unimportant mentions were provided – wholly insufficient, however, for outlining their own, specific profile. It was, nevertheless, a first step, a step continuing by now with the preparation – in advanced stage – of the second edition of the dictionary, meant at offerring a general image of the literature at Dunărea de Jos along all its epochs.

Starting with the first literary publications issued after December 1989 up to the realization of a dictionary of writers of Galați, the literature of Dunărea de Jos witnessed an ample and complex process of structural and valoric transformations, the impressive achievements recorded in both editorial and publicistic domains determining, naturally, an acute need for redefining one’s identity and for reconnection to the national cultural life from the newly-conquered positions. These achievements are but a stage, yet an extremely necessary one, in the realization – as a continuation of a significant and convincing *historicization* process – of a complete critical history of the literature produced at Dunărea de Jos.

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