

PETRU COMARNESCU- A REMARKABLE PERSONALITY OF THE ROMANIAN CULTURE

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Abstract

Petru Comarnescu remains one of the top representatives of his generation, which includes: Mircea Eliade, Mircea Vulcănescu, Mihail Sebastian, Emil Cioran, etc. He was a well-known Romanian Americanist and Anglicist, we owe to him the understanding and knowledge of the English and American literature in Romania. Petru Comarnescu was a man with wide horizons and humanistic preoccupations, of a renaissance erudition, that is why it is very difficult to define him, his name is found in art criticism, literary criticism, journalism, memoirs, cultural journalism, philosophy, translations. After 50 years from his death, I believe that we certainly have the moral obligation to remember him and honor his fruitful spirit, to evoke his role in enriching the Romanian culture. He added a new breath upon our criticism by setting up magazines and cultural societies. All his life he fought to popularize and impose the Romanian culture, to make known the Romanian values to the universal circuit.

Keywords: *culture, criterion, literature, universal, humanist.*

Due to the complexity of his work and interests, to which we add the ignorance and sometimes the calumny to which he was subjected



for decades, Petru Comarnescu remains one of the top representatives of his generation which is comprised of people such as: Mircea Eliade, Mircea Vulcănescu, Mihail Sebastian, Emil Cioran, Eugen Ionescu and others. One of the great merits of Petru Comarnescu is that he managed to launch into literature and to promote through the various journals, newspapers or cultural associations that he edited some of the most important youngsters of those times, who later on formed golden generations of interwar

intellectuals, from almost all humanistic branches. He was a pioneer for personalities such as Eugen Ionescu, Alexandru Sahia, Constantin Noica, Barbu Brezianu, Ionel Jianu, Arșavir Acterian and others. 50 years after his death, I believe that we have the moral obligation of remembering and honouring his spirit, as well as evoking his role in enriching the Romanian culture. He added a new spirit to our criticism by setting up journals and cultural societies. Being an optimistic nature and lacking any prejudice, Comarnescu managed to overcome the fake values and snobbery. All his life he fought to disseminate and impose the Romanian culture and to promote the Romanian values into the universal world. His writing activity took place between 1920 – 1970 and he approached topics such as essay, prose, art critic, monograph and translations (CRISTEA, 2003).

Comarnescu's complex activity is insufficiently, or maybe not at all, known to the young generation because in the last decades no reprints of his books were made, nor were his cultural contributions highlighted. A remarkable personality of the Romanian culture, both interwar and post-war, Petru Comarnescu presented various humanistic preoccupations, of a Renaissance erudition, his name being involved in art criticism, literary criticism, publishing, memoirs, cultural journalism, philosophy and translations. He was a Romanian Americanist and a well-known Anglicist and we owe him the penetration and knowledge in Romania of English and American literature, and the encouragement of the English and American language and culture, at a time when society was flirtatious with the French and German languages.

GENEALOGY, HIS FIRST STUDIES AND HIS TRAINING PERIOD

Petru Comarnescu stated on November 23, 1905 that he was born "in a happy dream sign", the third child of an intellectual family. "My childhood was enlivened by the beauty of this city perched among the hills, with art monuments and historical memories everywhere, where the most daring ideas and demands were discussed calmly and naturally" (COMARNESCU, 1985). His mother, Elena Comarnescu, born Cernătescu was a teacher in Iasi, and his grandmother was the sister of the scientist, Petru Poni, his wife Matilda Cugler-Poni being an important poet in Iasi. He had a close relationship with all Junimea members. His grandfather on his mother side, Gheorghe Cernătescu, was a math professor at Mihailean Academy. Emanoil Cernătescu, one of his close relatives, was a former mayor in Iasi and his son, Radu Cernătescu, a cousin of the author was highly important chemist, who Comarnescupresents in an exquisite manner: "we spent the entire day among books and when he played with us, he asked us about what he read. During the evenings he used to play the piano and he was the one who told me about Chopin" (COMARNESCU, 1985). Another one of his cousins was the diplomat, writer and poet Grigore Cugler. The writer's father, Petru Comarnescu, a postal clerk, stemmed from an old Polish noble family which took refuge in Moldova, in Botoșani and they spoke both Polish and German. In his memories, Petru Comarnescu admits that his father was an active and practical being, who understood the essential role of education and that is why he introduced his son to the great personalities of those times, such as A.D. Xenopol and Al. Philippide. "My father, Petru, was a good man and he liked making pranks, he was a postal clerk, but he knew that he came from quite a rich family." According to his own confession, he lived until he was seven in a house which belonged to the "Alexandru Lambrior" primary school, on Sararie street, his mother being the director of that school. He later on moved into a house on Carp street, no. 6, a neighbourhood which nowadays does no longer exist, because in the 1950s the buildings of the Antibiotice factory

were built on that site. For his secondary school years, he went to "Mihail Kogalniceanu" school, among 1912-1916, on Lascăr Catargiu street. The first years of high-school we studied at the National College in Iasi and then he moved to "Sf. Sava" high-school in Bucharest, living almost his entire life with his cousin George Vladimir and his wife Ana Nether (GROSU, 2008). "When my dad got sick of arteriosclerosis and my mother could no longer provide for me because she had to take care of dad, Ana și Georges took me into their home in Bucharest and starting from my fourth year of high-school I was like their son, not without some suffering and misunderstanding. But all in all, a good life" (COMARNESCU, 1994).

His literary debut takes place in 1923 in the magazine of the "Sf. Sava" high-school, "Tender branches", and he also enthusiastically led the literary society of the „Ion Heliade Radulescu" high-school. Later one, between 1925-1926, he collaborated with the newspaper "The bazaar world" under the pseudonym Pan the Researcher. This weekly newspaper appeared in Iasi, in 1924, having Mihail Sadoveanu, Tudor Arghezi, George Topârceanu, Otilia Cazimir as its main writers. Starting with 1925 names such as Mircea Eliade, Octav Botez, Ion Minulescu, N.N Tonitza, Al. Zisu and others collaborated with the newspaper.

He began publishing when he was in school, in magazines, periodical and newspapers. At the age of 21, Comarnescu makes his journalistic debut at the theatre and art newspaper "Baluster" (1926-1927). Sometime later he takes charge of the cultural page of the "Politics" newspaper, where he initiates research on the national specificity. Here he dealt with the newspaper's page entitled "Theatral, artistic and cultural politics", informing the public about various cultural and sporting events and he initiated investigations and debates on the topic of the national specificity in arts. People such as Nicolae Iorga, George Enescu, Fr. Sirato, Ion Jalea, and others took part in these investigations. Through these actions, Petru Comarnescu consolidated his strong relations with well-known personalities of the Romanian culture of the time.

He collaborated with "The last hour" newspaper, where we edited the cultural page from its debut up to 1930. At this newspaper

Comarnescu wrote literary chronicles, he initiated investigations and attracted young collaborators, generation peers, such as: Mihail Polihroniade, A. Broșteanu, Octav Șuluțiu, Emanoil Buhuță, Sandu Tudor, Olga Greceanu and others. Therefore, he managed to consolidate his position as intellectual and journalist. His cultural wishes led to the appearance of a new journal "The literary printing press", in 1928, together with Camil Baltazar but this journal did not last for very long. At this journal he dialogued with well-known people such as: Nicolae Iorga, Eugen Lovinescu, Lucian Blaga, Octavian Goga, Mircea Vulcănescu, and Vasile Băncilă (COMARNESCU, 1994).

As a student, he read very much, gaining rich information and developing a harmonious intellectual personality, approaching historical, philosophical, cultural, artistic and sociological topics. He published articles about Ion Barbu, Lucian Blaga, Tudor Vianu, Camil Petrescu and many others. Some years later he wrote the monographs of some plastic artists such as Ștefan Luchian, Fr. Șirato, N.N. Tonitza, Constantin Brâncuși, Nicolae Grigorescu and Rembrandt van Rijn (COMARNESCU, 1994).

In 1925, after graduating the Baccalaureate exam and performing the military service at the preparatory school for reserve officers in Craiova, Petru Comarnescu enrolls at the Faculty of Law, which he graduated in 1928 and the Faculty of Letters and Philosophy, that he graduated in 1929, both at the University of Bucharest. He went to Law School due to his uncle's wishes, the attorney Georges Nether, in order to follow his career path. He is not satisfied with being a lawyer and he feels that this job prevents him from developing his literary passion. He practiced it on a number of times at the request of his friends and relatives, successfully pleading in various different trials.

After graduating in 1929, he benefits from a generous American scholarship and leaves for the United States, the same year that his friend Mircea Eliade headed for India. After two years spend in America, he defends his PhD. thesis in philosophy at Southern California University in Los Angeles, on May 25, 1931. The title of his thesis was *The Nature of Beauty and Its Relation to Goodness*, published in Romanian under the title

Kalokagathonin 1946 (research on the ethical-aesthetic correlations in arts and in self-realization). As a PhD. student in America, he wrote numerous feature reports, articles and studies in the "Romanian life" and "Times" journals (COMARNESCU, 1994). It was only in 1966 that his PhD. degree was be equated with a Romanian doctorate in Arts History

HIS DEDICATION TO CULTURE

After coming back home he has the unpleasant surprise of not being able to obtain a teaching assistant position at the Faculty of Philosophy. This deception follows his throughout his life, especially as he was the only Romanian citizen with a PhD. degree in America. Together with Ionel Jianu he establishes in the autumn of 1931 the "Forum" group, where they organise a series of 12 conferences with the following topic: "The explanation of our time", where people such as Mircea Eliade, Mircea Vulcănescu, Mihail Sebastian, Ion Cantacuzino, Stelian Mateescu, Sergiu Condrea and others were present. The conferences took place in the hall of the Royal Foundation "Carol I" from Victoria Street. They had an enormous success; the halls were overcrowded. The year 1932-1933 included a new series of conferences with the topic: "The great figures of our century." Together with the development of the "Forum" group, P. Comarnescu, together with Mircea Vulcănescu and Alexandru Cristian Tell, establishes the interwar philosophy, arts and letters association Criterion (1932) and the interwar journal with the same name (1934), whose main purpose was to develop a national synthesis that included various cultural personalities. The association organises conferences on various topics, followed by debates. The conferences organised by the Criterion association had a major impact on the people of those times. There were conferences on Lenin, Freud, Chaplin, Gide, Mussolini, Bergson, Proust, Gandhi, Valery, some of the titles triggered fuss due to the sensitive topics approached and criticism on behalf of the political forces of those times. This is why the association self-disintegrated in 1934.

He translated both alone and in collaboration with Margareta Sterian, Eugen B. Marian, Petre Solomon, Alexandra Constantinovand others, many names from the English and American literature. Comarnescu translated, presented, analysed and commented on those works in his articles and forewords. Due to his translations on famous works, the Romanian readers got acquainted with the character Robinson Crusoe, from Daniel Defoe's most popular book, *The life and adventures of Robinson Crusoe* (1943), resumed in various editions; with the writer Eugene O'Neill and his works *Strange Interlude* (1939), *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1944); with Mark Twain with the novels *The Million Dollar Bank Note* (1964) and *Life on the Mississippi* (1964) or *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1943); *Rob Roy* by Walter Scott (1943); T. E. Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (1937); George Bernard Shaw, *The Devil's Disciple* (1946); Howard Fast, *Albert Parson's struggle* (1949) and many others.

He dedicated the following series to America: *Homo Americanus* (1933), *The Skyscrapers of New York* (1933), *America seen by the young man of today* (1934), *The faces and views of America* (1940), *America. The new world, the new life* (1947), *Benjamin Franklin* (1957). On April 29, 1948 he confessed: "*I had an aesthetic enchantment translating the "to be or not to be" scene" between Hamlet and his mother, discovering new meanings, rendering the philosophy of the original text, finding new understandings and beauties. You have to be a poet or philosopher to be able to translate Hamlet*" (COMARNESCU, 2003a).

Comarnescu appreciated Eugene O'Neill the most, admiring the way in which he presented the tragedy and the sorrow of the contemporary individual. He wrote studies and essays on the American playwright's creation: *The drama of the present-day individual; Eugene O'Neill, the man of the sea and of tragedy; How O'Neill manages to understand the present-day woman and life; How the playwright O'Neill perceives life and destiny; Dramas out of great love* and others.

He also translated and adapted numerous plays such as: *Strange interlude, Mourning becomes Electra, Desire under the elms* by O'Neill; *Caesar and Cleopatra, The devil's disciple, Pygmalion* by George Bernard Shaw; *Romeo and Juliet* by William Shakespeare; *An inspector calls* by J.B Priestley.

Having an aesthetic taste, Comarnescu remained in our culture also due to a number of monographs dedicated to some well-known artistic personalities: Magdalena Rădulescu (1946), *Șirato* (1946), Octav Băncilă (1954), Abgar Baltazar (1956), Nicolae Grigorescu (1959), Ștefan Luchian (1960), Ion Jalea (1962), Deneika (1968), Voroneț (1968) and others. Later on, he was to write articles or book in English on the most important Romanian plastic artists, such as: Gheorghe Petrașcu, Theodor Pallady, Nicolae Tonitza, Francisc Șirato, Ion Țuculescu, *The Romanian and the Universal in Brancusi's Work* (1970). Comarnescu is the first author who approached the influence of the Romanian folklore in the art of Constantin Brâncuși.

Structurally Comarnescu was his entire life a journalist, possessing all the necessary qualities for this both difficult and beautiful job: fugitive, a continuous spiritual restlessness, greed for information, hard to catch with something he did not know, optimistic in temperament and conceptions, with an inexhaustible energy, always "in the loop" and incisive. There was never any silence around him, everything vibrated the moment he appeared somewhere (CRISTEA, 2003).

He organised many conferences on various topics, some of them being recorded in kept in the archive of the Romanian radio broadcasting station. "*He had a unique oratorical gift, he simply electrified his audience, captivated to oblivion, amazed by the immense amount of information, by his intelligence and by his critical spirit*" (CRISTEA, 2003). In the last 7 years he held almost 100 conferences on Brâncuși, being a charming lecturer who knew how to attract his audience, he spoke a lot with fervour, with passion, he made interesting digressions, he quarrelled with his opponents, which delighted the audience, he was authentic, alive and well documented. The rooms where he held his conferences were full of people and this fact made him repeat them. His words to Ionel Jianu represent a proof of this fact: "*Yesterday I held a conference on the life and work of Brâncuși in the small hall of the Palace. Tickets sold out 3 weeks before, as soon as the poster was pasted... The conference will be repeated in Dalles on November 21.*" On December 27, 1964 he repeated the conference on Brâncuși for the third

time "I shall offer new details about his life, details that I obtained during the previous conferences" (CRISTEA, 2003).

Petru Comarnescu suffered a lot because the communist regime and of his enemies. He was the only person with a PhD. degree in aesthetics and yet he could not obtain a teaching position at the Institute of plastic arts because of Gh. Oprescu, the department head of the History of Arts (CRISTEA, 2003). In his diary he remembers the day of Friday, October 31, 1958: "I was a fool enough to sit for the position of associate professor at the department of the history of arts (Oțetea's department, universal history). It's a bad moment, I don't think I'll succeed, but I wanted to try not to blame myself later. An activity report for 14 years and yet incomplete. So what?" (COMARNESCU, 2003a). In the 1950s, went Comarnescu went through a period of terrible prohibitions, his name had suddenly disappeared from cultural life. Being "targeted" by the repression bodies of those times, on the grounds that he was pro-American, P. Comarnescu is denied the right to sign and is fired from all positions he holds. He hid his identity under the pseudonym Anton Coman.

One can notice P. Comarnescu's American democratic spirit, during a complicated historical period. In that period of social unrest and violent political clashes, extremist political parties were born, of the left, but especially of the right, which became tempting, fragmenting and ideologically dividing the young generation into different camps. Comarnescu differentiates himself from a part of the generation through non-regimentation and political non-involvement, he oscillated between the lack of politicism and democracy. He was not seduced by the extremist politics. He always had a democratic vision. P. Comarnescu argued with his teachers and generation peers,

trying to emphasize the error of their political engagement, but without any success (CRISTEA, 2003). In his diary, in January 1933, Comarnescu writes: "Some of the members side with the right-wing movements, such as Misu Polihroniade, who first tried to win Argetoianu's sympathy. We will have many surprises for those who understand to do active politics, left or right. Our generation is divided into two clearly opposite camps and in fierce battle. I do not want to be directly involved in politics, remaining in an intellectual position, and devoting myself to culture. Whether I succeed or not remains to be seen" (COMARNESCU, 2003b).

In a 1937 essay, Mihail Sebastian wrote that: "I think there are few of us who resist the double summons that terrorizes the world today, and we were looking beyond the "right" and the "left" (COMARNESCU, 2003b). In one letter, Ionel Jianu stated that "starting with 1935, ideologies replaced ideals and the young generation spread into opposing camps, some friends turning into fierce enemies, but my friendship with Petru Comarnescu withstood the hostilities of time and history" (CRISTEA, 2003).

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