

## ROMANIAN LITERARY HISTORY AT A CROSSROADS: MIHAI IOVĂNEL'S *HISTORY OF CONTEMPORARY ROMANIAN LITERATURE: 1990-2020* AND THE CULTURAL-MATERIALIST AND TRANSNATIONAL TURN IN LITERARY STUDIES

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As intellectual projects, literary histories hold a particular significance in Romanian culture; they recover authors and relegate them to anonymity, make and break canons, and promote and undermine ideologies and political agendas that reach far beyond literature and the aesthetic. "Literaturocentric," as has been described by some, this culture has treasured literary historiography. To this very day, the greatest aspiration of most Romanian critics is to write a history of national literature—of entire Romanian literature. In certain quarters, literary histories published during the first half of the previous century are still subject to a cult of sorts. The genre, its illustrations, and the reactions to them

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appear to suggest that in Romania, perhaps more so than elsewhere, literary history speaks to the country's ongoing wrestling with self-representation, to fantasies and anxieties of collective identity. This accounts for the remarkable proliferation of this critical mode and for its survival into a century that has otherwise witnessed the crisis and dearth of this form of literary scholarship. Be that as it may, one thing is clear: Romanian literary histories do not just describe a segment of culture; they are culturally descriptive and performative. They are a culture in and of themselves. They serve both as efforts to explain complex intersections between language, ideologies, and literary change and as self-referential tools for accumulating cultural capital in the interrelated fields of literature and its study.

The recent publication of *The History of Contemporary Romanian Literature: 1990-2020* by Mihai Iovănel has already sent shockwaves through the Romanian academe, raising key issues about literary historiography and its aesthetic and political stakes. As the first post-1989 history of contemporary Romanian literature, the volume raises and answers a range of fundamental questions on the literary canon, value criteria, contemporaneity, ideology, politics, gender, nationhood, and methodology. Iovănel's *History* conveys a desire specific to any endeavor dealing with contemporary historiography, which is to speak with the living, as one might paraphrase Stephen Greenblatt. This special-topic issue of *Studia Universitatis Babeş-Bolyai Philologia* seeks to examine the defining moments of this dialogue and, more broadly, the accomplishments and challenges of this event-book over and against the backdrop of recent national and international developments in literary-cultural studies, chiefly in literary history.

Western literary historiography has taken a particular turn over the last few decades, becoming the domain of collective, transnational efforts while striving for an objectivity not available, apparently, to solitary endeavors. In this context, Iovănel's literary history may seem at first glance to resemble more traditional historiographical undertakings. However, in his effort to transgress the national limitations inherent to any conventional literary history, Iovănel has opted for an ideological and political reading of Romanian literature. Moreover, in the concluding chapter, he argues for a transnational history of Romanian literature that pays particular attention to the intercultural networks tying national literature into other literary cultures, far and near, as well as for a "transnational canon." Iovănel's plea for a better marked relationality linking up Romanian literature and the world echoes other recent scholarly projects such as *Romanian Literature as World Literature* (Bloomsbury, 2018) while also engaging in dialogue with the national critical tradition—notably, the title of the volume is an homage of sorts to Eugen Lovinescu's literary history, which was published in the 1920s.

In a deliberately unconventional way, the first part of our thematic issue gathers responses to a questionnaire put together by Emanuel Modoc and Cosmin Borza. Pertaining to the past, present, and future of literary history and raising issues of periodization, canonicity, identity, and contemporaneity, among others, the questions have yielded thought-provoking considerations poised to enrich the transnational dialogue in which Romanian criticism, literary history, and literary theory have participated with increased vigor of late. Answering Modoc and Borza's questions are nationally and internationally recognized literary and cultural critics, theorists, and comparatists such as Stephen Burn, Robert Eaglestone, Mihai Iovănel, Keith Mitchell, Brian Ó Conchubhair, Patrick O'Donnell, Daniel O'Gorman, Eve Patten, Samah Selim, Mohammed Senoussi, Rūta Šlapkauskaitė, Andrei Terian, Galin Tihanov, and Bertrand Westphal.

The second part of our issue offers a sheaf of articles that variously engage with Mihai Iovănel's *History of Contemporary Romanian Literature* and more generally with the discipline of literary history and its recent morphings and predicaments. This section opens with Christian Moraru's answer to the question about where literary history may be going after postmodernism. His essay is followed by yet another compelling question posed by Andreea Mironescu in her article about the notion of generation, a crucial concept for Romanian literary historiography until recently, and this term's role in new, transnational histories of literary production and in criticism broadly. Mironescu shows that literary periodization is not just a functional instrument of contrast but also a vehicle of legitimizing and preserving the methodological leverage of periodization itself. Next, Grațiela Benga's two-pronged approach also takes up the idea of literary periodization while dwelling, not unlike most of the following contributions, on the "ideological ramifications" of Iovănel's history.

In the essay following Benga's, Andreea Mîrț analyzes the cross-peripheral relation between Romanian literature and its neighboring literatures and the play this complex dynamic gets in Iovănel's *History*. Similarly interested in the transnational dimension of literary history, Mîrț's article revolves around the effects this new perspective can have on notions and critical practices centered on canon, canonicity, status anxiety, and cultural capital. Using an interdisciplinary perspective that integrates literary and social studies, Mihaela Vancea's paper highlights, after that, the social function of Iovănel's new take on literary history. In turn, Larisa Prodan's essay discusses the *History's* strategies of de- and trans-nationalizing Romanian contemporary literature. In a critical reading of Iovănel's book, Daniel Clinci takes issue with several theoretical aspects on which, he contends, Iovănel could have spent more time so as to unpack their implications and deal with the problems they present in Romanian context.

Focusing on the premises of Iovănel's *History*, Anca Socaci's article investigates what she calls the eclectic character of the *History*, highlighting the limits of a project that strives to move away from the national historiographical tradition while retaining some of its features. A less orthodox take on the subject is Alexandru Matei's paper, which focuses on two authorship sides or dimensions that play out in Iovănel's *History*: the critic and the writer. Matei scrutinizes the former through the author's own use of Althusser's concept of "aleatory materialism" and tackles the latter from the standpoint of a "poetics" of literary history. Finally, Alex Ciorogar's paper analyzes, in a similar vein, the connection between literary history and authorship, commenting on how one modulates the other. This segment of the issue closes with several reviews of titles covering a problematic relevant to our focus.

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