

## RAMIFICATIONS OF IDEOLOGY: MAPPING CONTEMPORARY ROMANIAN LITERATURE

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*Article history: Received 30 January 2022; Revised 26 August 2022; Accepted 31 August 2022; Available online 20 September 2022; Available print 30 September 2022.*

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**ABSTRACT.** *Ramifications of Ideology: Mapping Contemporary Romanian Literature.* After outlining the mutations occurring in the background of literary histories, the analysis that follows shows, by focusing on the relevance of periodization in literary history, that, covering several decades as it does, Mihai Iovănel's *History of Contemporary Romanian Literature: 1990-2020* works out open filiations and parallelisms that extend a time interval of contrasts and continuities. In his effort to assign another dimension to literary history through alliances with disciplines that cross a critically structured and metacritically developed literary area, Iovănel attempts to make literary history more permeable. Thus, a section of his work investigates how *The History...* reacts, from the post-Marxist materialism viewpoint, to the particularities determined by the transition from one cultural pattern to another. That segment examines conceptual and methodological ramifications, identifies lineages or vulnerabilities, and shows that the existence of an area of intersection between literary history and memory transforms *The History...* into a narrative. Finally, another part of the book is dedicated to demonstrating that what Benga-Țuțuianu calls an "objectifying" approach can meet blind spots that prove relevant for the recontextualization of literary production and for sketching out a type of cosmopolitan imagery—a springboard to the discussion about world literature. Nevertheless, the arguments summed up in the last segment of the book prove unequivocally that Iovănel's *History* is a turning point in Romanian literary historiography.

**Keywords:** *materialism, temporality, transfer, periphery, world literature*

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**REZUMAT. *Ramificațiile ideologiei: cartografierea literaturii române contemporane.*** După schițarea mutațiilor petrecute în backgroundul istoriilor literare, analiza concentrată pe (i)relevanța periodizării în istoria literară arată că, deși e cuprinsă între limitele unei periodizări închise, *Istoria literaturii române contemporane. 1990-2020* recurge la filiații și paralelisme deschise care amplifică un interval temporal al contrastelor și continuităților. Pe direcția creșterii permeabilității istoriei literare se înscrie și efortul lui Iovănel de a-i atribui o altă dimensiune, prin alianțe disciplinare care străbat un spațiu literar structurat critic și desfășurat metacritic. O altă secțiune a lucrării investighează modul în care *Istoria...* răspunde (din perspectiva materialismului post-marxist) particularităților determinate de tranziția de la un model cultural la altul. Examinează ramificații conceptuale și metodologice, identifică ascendențe sau vulnerabilități și arată că existența unei zone de intersecție între istorie literară și memorie transformă *Istoria...* într-o narațiune. În fine, un segment e dedicat demonstrării faptului că abordarea obiectivantă poate întâlni *blind spots* care se dovedesc relevante pentru recontextualizarea producției literare și pentru schițarea unui imaginar cosmopolit – un punct de plecare în discuția despre literatura globală. Cu toate acestea, argumentele sintetizate în ultima parte a lucrării arată, fără echivoc, că *Istoria...* lui Iovănel fixează un punct de cotitură în istoriografia literară românească.

**Cuvinte-cheie:** *materialism, temporalitate, transfer, periferie, literatura lumii*

Over the year that has passed since the publication of Mihai Iovănel's *History of Contemporary Romanian Literature: 1990-2020*, the positions taken up by Romanian critics in traditional academic venues and scholarly modes of argumentation have been followed by acrimonious online debates. However, the vociferous reception of the book has not covered the entire literary scene. In some corners, opinions have been exchanged in a measured tone. Through this cautious withdrawal, an attempt has been made to avoid the ideological labelling of those involved in the discussions. The natural interest shown in any *history of literature* has sometimes been mistaken for the adherence to the same set of ideas. As the subject of this paper is not to study the attitudes generated by the relation to the increase or decrease of personal prestige (depending on the interest in Iovănel's work), I only note how the publication of a *history* causes twists and turns that are visible on the surface of a literary field<sup>2</sup> where underground dislocations (consequences of intellectual strategies that mask prejudices and reshape methodologies) are difficult to measure.

<sup>2</sup> I use this concept as it was defined by Pierre Bourdieu in *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, Stanford University Press, 1996.

The following lines continue the debate over *The History...* and try to demonstrate that Mihai Iovănel's work is a narrative that sums up conceptual renegotiations and ramifications, epistemic turns and unequal emphases laid on the (trans)national interactions that contemporary Romanian literature provocatively includes.

### Considerations on the Histories of Literature

A reflection on the history of literature cannot elude the various forms it has taken over the centuries. Outlined at the end of the 18th century and extended to the first decades of the 20th century, national beliefs found a generous field of projection in the history of literature. Literature established a certain possessive determiner: it became "our literature." This restrictive and defining identification was derived from the understanding of culture in the sense assigned to it by German Romanticism, along with the identification of the "national genius" (*Volksgeist*) in Herder's *Another Philosophy of History* (1774). The German philosopher underlined the inadequacy of subjecting facts to judgments built around ideal patterns and he pointed out that norms were, in turn, the products of certain types of genesis and contexts. With the formulation of this principle, the appreciation of regional specificity and diversity began to replace the universal values. In short, everything that is human is intrinsically linked to the history of its own place and time. A prerogative of humankind, the word (which, as we know, makes up the corpus of literature, but at the same time embodies the experience of the subject who writes) also belongs to history—or rather, a *certain* history designed by a type of reason that is historical in itself.

Given the absence of a solid tradition of national literature<sup>3</sup> and the unequivocal lack of professionalism of literary criticism in the second half of the 19th century, the history of "our literature" was inherently out of phase with the West. Perceived as the core of the history of literature, tradition as identified beyond the stakes of folklore—which Marianne Mesnil discovers in the shaping of a national identity, by underlining the distinction from the Other, and in major political desiderata (Mesnil 1997, 26)—held the attention of Nicolae Iorga, Sextil Pușcariu, Nicolae Cartoian and G. Călinescu. As they conceived them, the histories of "our literature" went beyond the rigid frames of the didactic-canonical works, to take on the aura of national projects "which assume, explicitly or

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<sup>3</sup> The "pașoptiști" (the Forty-Eighters) were greatly concerned with developing the national literature. Vasile Alecsandri's acid letters, for example, echo Herder's conception of the local spirit, language and literature. For details, see V. Alecsandri, "Către Alexandru Hurmuzaki," *Mircești*, 20 April 1868 (Alecsandri 1982, 352).

implicitly, the task of imagining the coherence, the old age, the continuity, the autarchy and especially the *identity potential* of a literature that became aware of itself only in the 19th century.”<sup>4</sup> Of all the histories of the first half of the 20th century, that of G. Călinescu became the absolute example of the continuity of literary tradition and, at the same time, it functioned as a model of critical exercise. As has been demonstrated (cf. Martin 1981, 209-223), the objective of proving that there exists a Romanian tradition extended organically to the present day has been achieved by capitalising on tradition from the present perspective, the recourse to involvement, adhesion, fragmentary critique (in search for favourable angles) and anticipatory, retroactive analogies leading to “regressive assimilation from a distance.”<sup>5</sup>

Looking at G. Călinescu’s work as a means of establishing the discourse of a history of literature (not as an object of worship), it is but natural to wonder to what extent it can still be relevant today, especially within the international academic field. At the time it was written, *The History of Romanian Literature from its Origins to the Present* responded to an unfortunate political situation and tried to ensure the stability of literary tradition (which was marked on the map of cultural values) as a counterweight to the volatile social and historical phenomena, consequently operating in contexts that focused on the national principle (with its nationalist extension, resumed in the 1980s). Today, its relevance is reduced primarily to a cultural perimeter sensitive to the issue of identity (yet unresponsive to secondary identities). On the international literary market, its impact is definitely undermined by 1) the distance in time, as the period after the fourth decade of the last century is not covered, and 2) the discrepancy between the current methods of organisation/approach and those used by G. Călinescu, who was reluctant to using socio-cultural insertions and faithful to the monographic principle.<sup>6</sup> As for the exemplary function of G. Călinescu’s *History...*, it results not only from the finality of the critical approach, but also from the authority it acquired. Despite all the differences that separate them (perspective, method, criteria, form, style), the *histories* that followed the work G. Călinescu published in 1941 share the attraction towards synthesis and the power that postulating principles and establishing hierarchies—acts of symbolic domination (in Bourdieu’s terms) bestowed upon them.

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<sup>4</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all translations are mine. The original Romanian reads: “care își asumă, explicit ori implicit, sarcina de a imagina coerența, vechimea, continuitatea, autarhia și mai ales potențialul identitar al unei literaturi care a devenit conștientă de sine abia în secolul al XIX-lea” (Crețu 2021).

<sup>5</sup> “asimilare regresivă la distanță” (Martin 1981, 223).

<sup>6</sup> Starting from the translation of G. Călinescu’s *History* into English, in 1988, Andrei Terian summarizes the shortcomings of the work and concludes that “for a foreign reader, this work resembles an arrangement of figures in an empty space” (Terian 2013, 8).

Although manifested with variable force, ideological and social control proved its persistence. E. Lovinescu had conceived his *History of Contemporary Romanian Literature* in an age when the traditional elites still preserved their domination in Europe,<sup>7</sup> on a social background that had brought culture closer to politics. The transition from Lovinescu's *History*, reflected through a liberal lens, to the national specificity with which G. Călinescu concluded his work *en fanfare* can be reduced to a change in understanding the self—from self-sufficient totality to being a part of a whole (named by terms and phrases that suggest the spirit of a place: *Volksgeist*, “spirit of the nation,” “local soul” etc.). The anti-liberal discourse of the second half of the 20th century, whose extensions and ramifications cover much of today's market of ideas, led to the narrowing and consolidation of the ideological pattern used in literary studies—both in the broader effort to rethink the social determinations of literature and its social function, and in the structure of a narrative (re)construction that responds to interrogations that are circumscribed by fixations. Regardless of the ideological matrix from which it is extracted, the limited and rectifying rhetoric cannot encompass, with its instruments, the whole web of determinations that refine literature.

### **Chronological Boundaries and Historical Defiance**

The relevance of periodization in today's literary studies has been questioned in terms of both mathematical abstraction and the premise that the authority of literature depends on its ability to particularise ages inaccurately determined in time, placing them in contrast to each other. Ted Underwood's plea to maintain periodization even under the unpredictable attacks of new methods and disciplines revolves around the organising principle of historical contrast, a central element in gaining the prestige of Anglo-Saxon literary culture. Consolidating the position of Digital Humanities, for instance, does not necessarily entail giving up periodization, because “as long as we intend to dramatize historical difference, some system of chronological boundaries will remain inevitable” (Underwood 2013, 171).

Mihai Iovănel's *History of the Contemporary Romanian Literature: 1990-2020* focuses on the literary period after 1989, without detaching it from the broader picture of literature. On the contrary, the references made to the fertile 1980s or, with enough precision, the 1970s or even further back in time (the chapter about *Postmodern Metarealism* includes references to Slavici's novel *Mara*) make history try to explain a system and outline its evolution, not just

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<sup>7</sup> For details, see Mayer (1981).

provide a succession of still snapshots. The comparative investigation, carried out vertically, does not stop at the borders of Romanian literature, but relies on an analytical intervention through which works by Romanian and foreign writers (sometimes separated by many decades) reveal shared conventions and distinct solutions. This is the case of Petru Cimpoeșu's *Story of the Great Brigand*, mirrored by Stanisław Lem's *Investigation*. Rooted within the limits of *closed periodization*, 1990-2020 (which may lead to an academic dispute over the *realia-nominalia* relation), Iovănel's *History...* recurses to *open filiations and parallelisms* that extend the time interval and enter a universal area—even in the chapters preceding the one about *Transnational Specificity*.

Iovănel ascribes the attempts of resynchronisation with Western narrative formulas (through the *Nouveau Roman*, magic realism and postmodernism) to the relativization of realism or to the metarealism that is outlined in Mircea Horia Simionescu's prose that is "close to Borges"<sup>8</sup> and integrated systemically by the "optzeciști" (the '80s generation of writers), who gave it the shape of metafiction. Iovănel's *History...* draws attention to the fact that the "optzeciști" "maintain a relationship of suspicion not so much with reality [...] as with the method of the old omniscient and totalising realism,"<sup>9</sup> a formulation I consider partially similar to Fredric Jameson's core of ideas that can be summed up by the amnesia of a postmodernity that has forgotten to think historically (Cf. Jameson 1991, 69, *passim*).

Although Iovănel redefines the relationship between contrast and continuity (by paying close attention to social mechanisms and gradual changes) historically, he encounters blind spots and additional difficulties when he considers disciplinary perimeters and time limits. However, such obstacles do not lead to the disappearance of periodiation. Instead, they can contribute to making literary history "more permeable to other disciplines" (Cf. Underwood 2013, 171). This is also the direction of Iovănel's effort to provide literary history with another dimension, through methodological and disciplinary alliances that cross a literary space that is structured critically and developed metacritically.

To put it differently, Iovănel's *History of Contemporary Romanian Literature* crosses national borders and chronological limits to engage in a dialogue with world literature (an area in which Iovănel has already practised his critical skills through his essay "Temporal Webs of World Literature: Rebranding Games and Global Relevance after the Second World War – Mircea Eliade, E. M. Cioran, Eugène Ionesco"). In this direction, it highlights the particularities of the Romanian culture that, very soon after 1989, experienced the openness to the

<sup>8</sup> "apropiată de Borges" (Iovănel 2021, 355).

<sup>9</sup> "Optzeciștii întrețin un raport de suspiciune nu atât cu realitatea [...], cât cu metoda vechiului realism omniscient și totalizator" (Iovănel 2021, 357).

past, which facilitated the recovery of several writers banned under the communist regime. In this sense, Iovănel argues against H. R. Patapievică's principle of cultural export and highlights a series of exceptions that weaken the hypothesis of the "isomorphic functioning of cultural temporality"<sup>10</sup> on which the former president of the Romanian Cultural Institute relied. Metaphorically illustrated by the passengers who catch or do not catch a train (an extension of the image Althusser uses when describing the materialist philosopher, a fragment Iovănel uses at the beginning of his work), the argumentation is given from a position that amends Pascale Casanova's theory of the uniform and rectilinear nature of the evolution of the relation between centres and peripheries, conditioned by a time whose point of reference is "the Greenwich meridian of literature" (Casanova 2007, 432). In his *History...*, Iovănel partially misquotes Casanova, using a debatable conceptual deviation: he replaces "the structure of world space" (Casanova 2007, 432) with "the structure of literary space."<sup>11</sup>

In the case of Romanian literature, the possibility is noted that the time gap "should be short-circuited by individual innovation" (Iovănel 2021, 661), as was the situation with Tristan Tzara. However, since the individual leap from a peripheral system is inefficient without knowing the coordinates of the central system that are ready to capitalize on it, Iovănel raises the issue of unequal exchange and, correlatively, that of a transfer underlying anti-mimetic innovation. It is the right time for the author of *The History...* to drop a reference to Franco Moretti and take a trip in "deep time"—a concept theorised by Wai Chee Dimock, who bases her vision on the expansion of national geography, on "irregular duration and extension [...] each occasioned by a different tie, and each loosening up the chronology and geography of the nation" (Dimock 2008, 4). To sum things up, Dimock's theory opposes the idea of homogeneous identity claimed by traditional literary studies, and Iovănel's examples are illustrative of the variations induced by the changeable nature of the socio-political, economic and ideological macrocontext (Vintilă Horia, Mircea Eliade, Mihail Sebastian) and demonstrate that "[t]emporality is a milieu that must be explored and taken into account alongside the spatial milieu. [...] The variations of the international literary stock exchange [...] legitimize the view of globalization as *recursive globalisation* (emphasis in original), as a non-uniform space-time process, which, not involving a state of perpetual motion, requires periodic reproduction to continue."<sup>12</sup> Through the theoretical observations it provides,

<sup>10</sup> "ipoteza unei funcționări izomorfe a temporalității cultural" (Iovănel 2021, 659).

<sup>11</sup> "structura spațiului literar" (Iovănel 2021, 661).

<sup>12</sup> "Temporalitatea reprezintă așadar un mediu care trebuie explorat și luat în calcul alături de factorul spațial. [...] Variațiile bursei internaționale de valori literare [...] legitimează privirea globalizării ca globalizare recursivă, ca proces spațio-temporal neuniform, care, nefiind un perpetuum mobile, are nevoie de o reproducere periodică pentru a continua" (Iovănel 2021, 663-4).

the chapter about *Spaces and Temporalities* constitutes, in my opinion, an irradiating nucleus that spreads the meaning of duration in the Romanian literary history. Consequently, a new map with flexible spatial limits and temporal boundaries, moving farther and farther away, replaces the traditional rigid map of the history of literature. To underline the fact that Iovănel rethinks national literature beyond the borders of a state, Snejana Ung borrows Mario J. Valdés' concept of "node" that "intersects with other nodes in a network" (Ung 2021, 17).

### Concepts, Peculiarities, Products: A Sort of Narrative

In his *History of Contemporary Romanian Literature*, Mihai Iovănel seems to react, indirectly, to Andrei Terian's reproaches to Călinescu's *History*. The micromonographs (unequal in size and accuracy, which in itself hides a form of hierarchy) are no longer ordered in a deserted space, but in the mobile landscape of the *evolution of ideology*. Iovănel's *History...* makes a compromise between ideological criticism and monographic tradition, assembled with a methodological and epistemological instrument that provides the material with undoubted novelty. Comments that cover *ad nauseam* a whole range of positions—from enthusiastic approval (with variable doses of arguments or emotional connections) to more or less sweetened rejection have already been made about the post-Marxist angle from which Mihai Iovănel writes his *History...* There have also been conceptual controversies and taxonomy-related disputes, which this paper does not repeat.<sup>13</sup>

Briefly, Mihai Iovănel's *History...*, although close to Lovinescu's work in structure, follows the *evolution of ideologies* immediately after outlining the political history after 1990. (The absence of the adjective "literary," which appeared in Lovinescu's *History...*, suggests the interest of the author, who at first expels aesthetics from his analysis, only to return to it in the second part of his work.) The integration of literature into the body of ideological movements is followed by the inspection of the material conditions, the survey of the power relations in the literary field, the inventory of cultural theories and myths, the presentation of critical directions and the outline of "theories and positions" (the insufficiently motivated presence of postcolonialism is surprising); in the second half of his work, the author returns to literature, examining it as a direct consequence of the described milieu. In my opinion, this kind of approach is welcome, as after 1990 the entire literary field, from power relations and the impact of literature on society to literary and reception strategies, changed.

Mihai Iovănel's has shown an appetite for the inventory of the dynamic cultural background through the lens of ideological criticism at least since 2017,

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<sup>13</sup> For details, see *Observator cultural*, no. 1067 (2021) and *Transilvania*, no. 7-8 (2021).

when he published *The Ideologies of Romanian Post-Communist Literature*. The analysis of the ambiguous meanings of ideology led Iovănel to the definition given by Louis Althusser, who discusses ideology from the perspective of the continuity between theory and practice. Along these lines, despite the weakness perpetuated by the illusory and allusive nature of ideology, he proclaims the relevance of this concept in the debates on post-communism (Iovănel 2021, 12-14).

Based on post-Marxist ideology and operating with concepts explained in *The Ideologies...*, *The History of the Contemporary Romanian Literature* is a set of systemic and synthetic changing consequences of the social dynamics that has preceded and accompanied them. It is a post-Marxist polemical reply to the Romanian criticism of the last decades, designed to oppose both the propagandistic configuration (implied during the communist years) and the fluctuation between the autonomy of the aesthetic and the ethnicistic aura. While the theoretical link between Mihai Iovănel's two works relies on a concept (a "point of resistance") and Louis Althusser's vision on the materialism of contingency,<sup>14</sup> the bridges between them are visible at the discursive level: *The Ideologies...* and *The History of Literature...* share segments and syntagmatic overlaps that consolidate their common ground. The author does not hide that he recycles material. In *Acknowledgements*, after the *Introductory Note*, he confesses that *The History...* recovers, to varying degrees, articles from the *General Dictionary of Romanian Literature* (DGRL), reviews and essays published in various periodicals in the past fifteen years and, evidently, a large part of *The Ideologies...*

Besides the difficulty of analysing a literature in progress, characterised by permanent bifurcations, deviations and redimensioning, the development of a history of contemporary literature is complicated in the case of Romania, whose marginal position determines distinct processes, variations and reactions on the unstable map of world literature. The series of particularities includes the transition from the cultural model imposed by a totalitarian political regime, in which the immutable communist theses were intertwined with nationalist rhetoric and the cult of personality, to a cultural model that called itself neoliberal and neoconservative at the same time. As Iovănel's *History* shows, this transition is subordinated to the fluctuation between stability and instability. Or between *homeostasis* and *entropy*.

The fragmentation and the destructive recomposition of society are reflected in a literary field whose evolution (institutional, conceptual, epistemological, mythographic etc.) reveals an impasse and "points of resistance" —a concept meant to sum up "systemic reasons" and to identify precisely the nexus of such systemic difficulties that both communist and post-communist

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<sup>14</sup> The works Iovănel quotes are mainly Althusser (1995 and 2006).

writers encounter, although they negotiated the poetic influence of their predecessors (Iovănel 2021, 273). Borrowed from Stanisław Lem,<sup>15</sup> introduced in Chapter 1 of *The Ideologies...* and then in *The History...*, this concept is directly related to the creative block experienced by the writers who evolved in a system of negative conditioning and who, in post-communism, find themselves in the situation of discovering their own points of resistance in a “heuristic effort deprived of the generous financing that communism provided for the cultural system.”<sup>16</sup> With the mention that the author’s laudatory conclusion regarding the financing of the cultural system during the communist period remains debatable unless accompanied by nuances that clarify the writers’ belonging to the system (and unless the differences resulting from obedience, ambiguity and nonconformism are specified), I note that Iovănel’s *History...* reveals the fluid interaction between literature and the points of resistance that can turn the confrontation with the strength of the material into a convenient use of the formula.

As far as the points of resistance are concerned, I can identify a theoretical affiliation and a lack of terminological flexibility in Stanisław Lem’s line. On the one hand, the former is the legacy of the Frankfurt School of Thought, which (although developed from Marxist roots) looked critically at the entire dialectical mechanism and doubted the synthetic solutioning of contradictions. In other words, dialectical tension can give way to conventional softening, pliable after a pattern that neo-Marxism labels as bourgeois. On the other hand, Iovănel’s critical perspective does not extend to the ideology he assumes and from which he derives, in turn, a position of power. However, Althusser, the thinker on whose work Mihai Iovănel bases his theoretical construction, was also the theorist of the purity of the concept,<sup>17</sup> and his epistemological contribution developed mainly on rejecting the idea of a guarantee (which, by its nature, is ideological) and on the distinction between the real object and the object of knowledge. From this point of view, the author of *The History...* detaches himself from Althusser’s position, as his work, taken in its entirety, raises a problem of adequacy to the object of knowledge. It would have been expected that all ideologies should fall into this category, instead of one of them being privileged as a guarantee of objectification.

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<sup>15</sup> Iovănel is a declared admirer of SF literature; therefore, his recourse to a concept suggested by the well-known Polish writer does not come as a surprise.

<sup>16</sup> “travaliu euristic lipsit de finanțarea generoasă pe care comunismul o asigurase sistemului cultural” (Iovănel 2021, 273).

<sup>17</sup> In a comprehensive study on Althusser, François Matheron writes: “purity of the concept: not the product of an empirical purification, which would subsequently only demand to return to reality, but a concept situated in an adequate relationship to an object of knowledge produced by theoretical labour” (508).

The points of resistance (which concentrate multiple conditions integrated in the institution of literature) lead the critical discourse in its double (ideological and literary) openness, but they lose their ability when they reach the territory of ambivalences, which is refractory to ideological over determination. In addition to this shortcoming, there would be a leap towards a figural potential that would coagulate the mobility of metamorphoses. Layers of flexible matter are gathered on the complicated twists of a plane on which the points of resistance are projected, placing the geometry not only under the sign of multifunctionality, but also of the coexistences that determine unpredictable changes on the vertical line of the literary system.

In an article that tests the (dis)advantages of the points of resistance, to which he prefers the regimes of relevance outlined by Tihanov,<sup>18</sup> Doris Mironescu identifies in their systematic multifunctionality (maintained by intersectional and parallel action) items that bring it closer to Itamar Even-Zohar's polysystem theory. The researcher from Iași finds a legitimate function in Even-Zohar theory, by outlining a theoretical framework necessary "to discuss the systemic interferences that define a literary period, post-communism, still insufficiently conceptualized" (Mironescu 2021, 113). I consider this suggestion justified, but I would like to make two observations: unlike Mironescu, the Israeli theorist, in his recent studies, avoids using the term "context" and defines literary work through its interactions with a cultural milieu (viewed as a whole) for which prefers the concept of "repertoire." More precisely, by "repertoire" Even-Zohar means a system of individual items and symbolic patterns,<sup>19</sup> either spontaneous or deliberate, which involves a sum of internal processes, as well as imports and transfers. The symbolic model is defined as a structure in use within the wider society and adopted individually. Even-Zohar bases the connection between the social generation of the repertoire and the processes of internalisation on Bourdieu's theory of habitus, but catches our eye is the theoretical framework of the "repertoire," which encompasses the area of cultural memory. Any activity or action, any physical or semiotic "object" can be seen as a "product" of a repertoire (Even-Zohar 1997, 27), which, via interactions with other individual items or symbolic models, highlights similarities and differences that, in turn, point out contradictory types of cultural memory.

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<sup>18</sup> "The disadvantage of the points of resistance theory is its fatal concreteness, the impossibility of generalization, as long as the points of resistance can be defined only [...] starting from concrete cases. Iovănel's theory favours a horizontal perspective of the literary system, which shares Tihanov's idea of competitive plurality, but adds an important nuance, i.e. the emphasis on systematic parallel multifunctionalities, because the different institutional, epistemological, ecological etc. points of resistance operate simultaneously and intersectively" (Mironescu 2021, 109).

<sup>19</sup> To put it simply, the symbolic model is defined as "that pre-knowledge according to which the event is interpreted" (Even-Zohar 1997, 22).

Much has been said about literature as a repository of national and/or cultural memory, but this assimilation concerns me here strictly in relation to the following question: to what extent is Iovănel's *History...* a form of preserving cultural memory, in an age when the history of literature has lost its ability to preserve national memory in an institutionalized manner? The retrospective angle from which the history of literature has been explored has shown that nations have (re)invented an identity in the matrix of "imagined communities."<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, not only identity, but also tradition can be invented, given that "all invented traditions, so far as possible, use history as a legitimator of action and cement of group cohesion" (Hobsbawn 2014, 12). By repeatedly showing that literature cannot be understood by dissociating it from history (which determines the assertion of the retrospective nature of the literary field), Iovănel critically opposes the autonomy of the work, leaves the national literature paradigm and marches through the market of the current metaliterary ideas (Iovănel 2021, 664).

However, with all its incongruity in relation to the national literature, contemporary Romanian literature does not exclude a cultural mechanism that can determine the degree of resistance of the tradition in the configuration of a collective narrative. By its polemical position towards the tradition of literary history and within the limits of theoretical reflection that overshadows the national memory, Iovănel's work maps a space from where the nostalgia of memory was evacuated and replaced by cultural memory. Cultural memory also results from the network of continuities and oppositions that integrates the poetics of different ages of literature (the '80s and the next decades) or the same age (the poetry of the 2000s, for example). The history of literature has turned into an essential space of theoretical reflection (in a time that has moved away from theory) and a laboratory for testing research procedures, in which the methods "find their ultimate application" (Bru, De Bruyn, and Delville 2016, 1). The common points of *literary history and memory* turn Iovănel's *History...* into a *narrative*—reinforced by temporalities, spaces, characters and causal relations (Cf. Kalman 2000, 123)—in which an admirable amount of information is absorbed, although the result is fragmentary sociologically and literarily in the first two parts, and flawed analytically in Part Three and Four.

### **In Search of Truth: A Transregional Approach**

I will point out that the objectifying approach is not equivalent to overcoming some blind spots that, when explored, would have served, on the

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<sup>20</sup> National or community identity is a mental construct refreshed by the feeling of belonging to an *imagined political community* whose imaginary nature is given by the impossibility of a construction based on direct interpersonal relationships (Cf. Anderson 2006, 15).

one hand, to recontextualize literary production and the circulation of books (before and after 1989) and, on the other, to highlight the cosmopolitan imagination<sup>21</sup> that constitutes the platform of world literature.

The over 60-year history of the “Pavel Dan” literary group in Timișoara is illustrative for the changes in the stakes of such groups in a totalitarian society (itself with many emphasis shifts from the Cultural Revolution indicated in the July Theses<sup>22</sup> to the nationalism of the '80s) or in the ambiguous transition to democracy. The evolution of the longest-lived and still active Romanian literary group reflects the inconstancy of the sociability networks and the mistrust of the symbolic power poles in times that, for different reasons, favoured tensions instead of stimulating convergences. Attempts to build and support dialogues (between the province and the centre) on the literary scene have existed since the times when legitimation was done collectively, through group contributions, in periodicals or volumes. In the spring of 1977, when the literary group “Cenaclul de luni” was beginning to take shape, the “Amfiteatru” periodical published texts by members of “Pavel Dan” from Timișoara. Of these, Ion Monoran was published in “Amfiteatru” several times (between 1978 and 1988), and his poetics was suggested as a possible precursor of the “opzeciști” generation.<sup>23</sup> An innovative aesthetic movement with a polemical attitude towards both the official literary matrix and the modernist aesthetics coagulated around Monoran, Mircea Bârsilă and Adrian Derlea. About “Monodersilism,” a movement to which the entire “Pavel Dan” literary group adhered in the '80s, only a few people still speak today: Cornel Ungureanu, Viorel Marineasa and Eugen Bunaru.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the cohesion of the group was stimulated not so much by the similarities of the professional path, as by the existence of an underground, ethical force field configured around the non-ideological literary

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<sup>21</sup> The concept was developed by Gerard Delanty in *The Cosmopolitan Imagination*, Cambridge University Press, 2010.

<sup>22</sup> This is the name given to the speech that Nicolae Ceaușescu gave before the Executive Committee of the Romanian Communist Party on July 6, 1971: *Proposed measures for the improvement of political-ideological activity of the Marxist-Leninist education of party members, of all working people*.

<sup>23</sup> “Monoran’s poetry breathes the air of the Eighties Generation without being epigonic. Apparently paradoxical, my statement covers a reality: many of the authors who will join this wave sooner or later are, in fact, mere emulators of their congeners... With the exception of Monoran [...] who develops his own first-rate literary consciousness (following a completely different path than the members of the “Cenaclul de Luni” group). He feels the pulse of literature, he understands its sources very early on, and he is, spontaneously and synthetically, intertextual, self-referential, biographical, transitive [...] at the same time—from the very beginning, even before these trends become imperative” (Ciotloș 2014). A whole chapter is dedicated to Monoran in Ciotloș (2021, 286-298).

nucleus. The underground trajectory<sup>24</sup> of the group surfaced in December 1989, when young writers from “Pavel Dan” were at the forefront of the Revolution (Ion Monoran,<sup>25</sup> Petru Ilieșu, Vasile Popovici, Daniel Vighi). Naturally, after 1990, the group underwent a number of changes—new leaders, new generations of writers. Nevertheless, “Pavel Dan” remained a space for forging artistic consciousness and understanding the dynamics of the literary field, on the flexible coordinates of the group’s aura and cohesion and individual proficiency. Moni Stănilă, Tudor Crețu, Alexandru Potcoavă, Ana Pușcașu, Alexandru Higyed began to legitimize themselves within this group and dialogues were started with representative poets of the last decades (Ioan Es. Pop, Doina Ioanid, Ruxandra Novac, Elena Vlădăreanu, Oana Cătălina Ninu, V. Leac, Răzvan Țupa, Miruna Vlada).

Consequently, although Iovănel’s *History...* signals the disappearance of some established literary groups (Junimea, Universitas) and the emergence of others (Litere 2000, Euridice, Nepotu’ lui Thoreau, Institutul Blecher, Zona Nouă), also dedicating several pages to SF literary groups,<sup>26</sup> it leaves out (as does DGLR) a group with over six decades of continuous activity, during which it consolidated itself as a hub in the mechanism of cultural memory—which comprises not only discourses, but also epistemes. Literary history and cultural memory intersect due to the possibility of simultaneous examination (in synchrony and diachrony), to which the fact that they leave behind value judgments (often canonically cemented) is added. Unfortunately, “Pavel Dan” lacked the university roots that would have ensured it both the continuity<sup>27</sup> and the high calibre that Mircea Martin, Nicolae Manolescu or Ion Pop offered to the literary groups in Bucharest or Cluj, but a just exploration of its history is relevant: 1) for the study of the impact of the transition from the restrictive conditions of an ideologically suffocated literary field to new contexts in which literary practices are influenced by other types of limitations; 2) for the confrontation between literature understood as a heteronomous, respectively, an autonomous fact (with ethical-aesthetic positions that challenged the ideological constraints); 3) for the recomposition of significant literary genealogies; 4) for the survey of the lasting institutional structures, of their interaction, from which

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<sup>24</sup> For the anti-system orientation of the literary group, see Marineasa (2019 a, 17-20), and Bunaru (2021).

<sup>25</sup> Monoran died in 1993, before his first printed volume appeared. Marineasa gives excerpts from the Securitate dossier on Ion Monoran (interrogated and kept under surveillance since the ‘70s) Marineasa (2019 b, 276-280).

<sup>26</sup> Iovănel also mentions the “H.G. Wells” SF group of Timișoara, established in 1969. Viorel Marineasa was a member of the group in the ‘60s and then its coordinator from 1974 to 1990.

<sup>27</sup> For short periods of time, “Pavel Dan” evolved under the spiritual tutelage of Marcel Pop-Corniş, Cornel Ungureanu, Livius Ciocârlie.

the post-1989 literature was produced; 5) for the discussion about deepening the cleavages in the Romanian literary field, the multiple causes of which (including partial solidarity and reconfiguration of the positions of power in the literary field) would deserve a special debate.

Some notes in the second half of Iovănel's *History...* require more extensive analysis, but without inflamed assertions and fatalism. In the absence of clarifications, summary judgements will remain ambiguous. In the following, I examine a label used in the *Evolution of Fiction*, although connecting the *Post-human Dispersion* (integrated in the *Evolution of Poetry*) with world literature seems equally necessary to me.

An author of a significant novel mentioned on Iovănel's List is Radu Pavel Gheo, who (even though mentioned in the pages about paraliterature) appears mainly in the section about *Points of Resistance* and that on *Capitalist Realism*. In the former, Gheo appears under the title *Regionalii (The Provincials)* (although this writer from Timisoara is the only one labelled in this section)—a title justified by those “regional tensions, well-seasoned from the viewpoint of race and class”<sup>28</sup> problematized in *Disco Titanic*, a novel in which one of the characters, Vlad, raises the issue of an autonomous Banat. Starting from two quotes about this issue, the author of *The History...* reviews the amoral biography of a character who, having seen the ravages of the ex-Yugoslav war, ends up “questioning his own clichés about the Banat Republic.”<sup>29</sup>

As far as I am concerned, the regional issue is not reduced to the tensions that pervade the narrative discourse. In fact, Vlad's singular opinion reflects its imbalance in relation to the aspirations of the people of Banat.<sup>30</sup> Suggestive for this character's process of transformation (but without being its cause), the issue of Banat's autonomy appears as an isolated reminiscence of a historical fact. Given that it is not a topical matter and especially that it occupies only the second place in the character's evolution, it becomes inoperative when one tries to legitimize it as a taxonomic criterion.

The regional issue in *Disco Titanic* is, however, a completely different one and it is more difficult to follow than the tensions on the surface. The novel

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<sup>28</sup> “tensiuni regionale, bine condimentate rasist și clasist” (Iovănel 2021, 335).

<sup>29</sup> “să-și interogheze propriile clișee despre Republica Banat” (Iovănel 2021, 337).

<sup>30</sup> 1918 was a complicated year for Banat. The Banat Republic was proposed by Dr. Otto Roth and Albert Bartha, after the Budapest meeting of the Hungarian political leaders, who were trying to find solutions for the perpetuation of the Hungarian influence in the region. On October 31, Otto Roth proclaimed the Banat Republic and declared that it remained attached to the new Hungarian government. The leaders of the Romanians left the meeting and formed a Council led by Dr. Aurel Cosma, who publicly stated that he did not accept Dr. Otto Roth's proposal. When the Hungarian army withdrew north of Mureș (based on the Belgrade Convention), Serbian military units entered Banat, occupying Timisoara. In 1919, Banat was divided between Romania and the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes.

reconstructs a space of major traumas: having borders that do not match the national ones, Gheo's Banat bears the imprint of Central-European paradoxes impregnated by the dialectical balance between order and dissolution, between creative energy and disintegration. I will focus on two elements that support this hypothesis. One acts at the level of narrative organisation, the other at that of creating a distinct atmosphere.

First, the combination of realism and fantastic in *Disco Titanic* and *Good Night, Children!* is part of the narrative tradition of some prose writers, who, against the background of a long history of fixing borders, combine lucidity and irrationality, reality and myth, until any distinction between them is lost. In discussing the novels focused on the way historical trauma is recorded at the juncture of individual experience and rigid discourse, we may survey some novels published by the Romanian Sorin Titel or other significant Eastern and Central European writers. In *Four-Fingered People*, the Serbian Miodrag Bulatović draws the mythical-reverberant face of the demonic and rewrites the relationship between power and submission, between the process of forming and that of de-forming. A story of the underground, with anti-heroes whose anti-path dynamites topographies and stereotypes (of involvement, action and evolution), *Four-Fingered People* establishes absences (father, country, identity, integrity) and gives successive re-definitions of the peripheries. *Landscape Painted with Tea*, a novel by Milorad Pavić (a Serbian of Croatian origin) is also placed between history and myth, reuniting contradictions and complementarities. In the story of the failed architect, who designs shadowless buildings (as his son Nikola calls them), but later becomes the owner of a pharmaceutical concern, Pavić overturns reality, extracts an archetypal core and reinterprets it according to his own vision of knowledge. *Primeval and Other Times*, a novel by Polish writer Olga Tokarczuk, is not just the story of an ambivalent place, but also the evocation of certain types of housing. More specifically, it highlights how a place (the centre, the periphery, the house, the body) is viewed from within. But each man's "time" becomes a place, inaugurating a type of personal topography in which space and time, reality and dream are intertwined in the dazzling naturalness of inaccuracy.

Second, from Gheo's novels one can extract a well-defined space of an interval, of a provisional state that feeds the ethos of expectation (as an epistemic, ethical, and political resettlement in dynamics). From different positions, with incongruous attitudes, the protagonists of the two novels live in a "state of exception"<sup>31</sup>—that of expectation and urgency. As defined by Giorgio Agamben, exile involves exclusion and, at the same time, inclusion. More specifically, it

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<sup>31</sup> By "state of exception" I mean the state of being exiled, with all its Messianic substance, in line with Agamben (2008).

involves the power to maintain a relationship with something that is supposed to lack any kind of relationship (Cf. Agamben 2006, 92).

It should be clear that Gheo's novels have a more appropriate place in the Central-European narrative structure (that exposes the link between fragility and power against the background of the clash between structural and historical trauma)<sup>32</sup> and the "deep time"-oriented network than among the "provincials" (who are interested in the false problem of a dated autonomy) or among the representatives of the "capitalist realism."<sup>33</sup> I would add that the common points of the above-mentioned novels (also understood as "figurative mapping")<sup>34</sup> leave behind the succession of national genealogy and put contemporary Romanian literature on the comprehensive map of the world literary space. Besides its oppositions, the world literary space reveals a *continuum* (Cf. Casanova 2007, 109) that entitles us to redefine "our literature," pushing its limits further to the horizon. Indeed, *The History...* could have explored more deeply how contemporary Romanian literature rethinks Europe and integrates into world literature. The conceptual frame of the last part of Iovănel's work still requires exercises of finesse both in the *Evolution of Fiction* (as I have shown in the case of Gheo's novels) and in the *Evolution of Poetry*, where especially the post-human parade requires transnational extensions. Finally, the themes and the narrative strategies used by Gheo and the other mentioned writers (as well as other Eastern and Central-European novelists) increase the chance that literary experience has to provide "an unexpected input for current policy-making" (D'Haen 2009, 9) that the European community needs so badly.

At any rate, despite its authoritarian yet unsubstantiated assertions and the discrepancy between the transcanonical postulate and the composition of representative lists (which, in the absence of conceptual clarifications, mix the ideological pattern with the aesthetic filter), Iovănel's *History...* remains, from my point of view, a significant work for at least four reasons. The first concerns the coagulation of an explanatory narrative of contemporary Romanian literature, which other literary historians have failed to do in recent decades. The second is the *assumption* of the ideological perspective, with all the (positive and negative) consequences that arise from here. The third derives from the conceptual and

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<sup>32</sup> Dominick LaCapra distinguishes the "structural trauma" (transhistorical ruptures, decodable through psychoanalysis: "adoption of language," "separation from the mother" etc.) from the "historical trauma" (radical historical ruptures that generate collective traumatic experiences). For details, see LaCapra (2004).

<sup>33</sup> Mihai Iovănel's insufficient argumentation for selecting this concept borrowed from Mark Fisher is pointed out by Cobuz (2021, 119-120).

<sup>34</sup> The "figurative mapping" concept is explained by Miller Hillis (1995, 19, *passim*). He adds: "The story traces out diachronically the movement of the characters from house to house, and from time to time, as the crisscross of their relationships gradually creates an imaginary space" (19).

informational mechanism that reinforces the transcanonical vision. Finally, the fourth lies in the transnational extensions, which anchor *The History...* in the current literary research area. These are sufficient arguments to state that Iovănel's work sets a turning point in Romanian literary history. From now on, whatever will be written within the flexible perimeter of literary history will be related, from one angle or another, to this work.

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