

Pe nisipuri mișcătoare (On Shifty Sands) by Magda Teodorescu

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At least two decades ago, the project which underlies the *History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe* would have seemed utopian. Now in 2004, the publication of the first of the four volumes, coordinated by Marcel Cornis-Pope, professor at Virginia Commonwealth University, and by John Neubauer, professor at University of Amsterdam, coincides with admission of several new East European members in the European Union. By the time this project will be completed, Romania itself will be admitted. This History inaugurates a sub-series dedicated to regional histories inside the Comparative History of Literatures in European Languages, coordinated by the Publication Committee of ICLA. Furthermore, it is part of the Literary History project led by professors Mario Valdés and Linda Hutcheon of the University of Toronto. I have enumerated these institutions because I want to underscore the scope of the project and its transnational significance.

After the fall of the Iron Curtain the study of the cultures of the former Soviet block has become a priority in many North American and West European universities. Departments and centers previously engaged in Soviet, Slavic, or South-Eastern European studies have been reoriented towards the post-totalitarian phenomena. The books and articles of Vladimir Tismăneanu are a signpost in this reorientation. In addition, this reorientation has targeted the former Central and Eastern European empires, which collapsed after World War I, retracing the cultural history of Vienna, the center of maximum cultural dissemination with impact on Europe and United States.

In Romania, the Third Europe foundation, led by the distinguished scholars Cornel Ungureanu and Adriana Babeți, is engaged in a similar project to that pursued in the recently published *History*. I found surprising that this center, which has published so far a number of most useful books, is not mentioned in the volume coordinated by Marcel Cornis-Pope; perhaps it will be mentioned in the following volumes!

As I have suggested, this project has not emerged out of the blue sky or on virgin ground. As a matter of fact the volume coordinators do not claim originality. As Mario J. Valdés mentions in the Preface, the present work is a "translation" of the method of the Annals School to literary history, a reaction against neo-positivism, uncontaminated however by impressionistic relativism (which can have positive results, sometimes). This History, the editors state, is not a simple work of factology but a contextualization. Furthermore, fragmentariness, continuities and discontinuities, and haunting figures rewrite history. How can one find the right path in this conceptual thicket, how can one keep the right balance now that national literary histories have fallen out of fashion and new theoretical modalities applicable to literary history have emerged. I'm thinking primarily of the

fertile concept of rereading, discussed by Matei Călinescu, and that of critical history of literature proposed by Nicolae Manolescu. The competition is significant and the simple elimination of the qualifier "national" in favor of "regional" does not guarantee automatic quality. The present project does not pursue a simple replacement of terms: Marcel Cornis-Pope and John Neubauer justify their choice of terms judiciously, reviewing a number of previous options (Mitteleuropa, Eastern Europe, Central Europe), arriving at the term East-Central Europe. What is truly captivating in this project is the suggestion of the subtitle. The idea of junctures and disjunctures was suggested to the two editors by J. Hillis Miller's *Topographies*, a book insufficiently known to Romanian theorists and critics. Miller emphasizes the processuality of the reading act, its continuous shifting ("lateral play"), the foregrounding of a structure of points or "nodes" that is continually submitted to questioning. Reading becomes an endless act, Eliot's process of "visions and revisions." Miller demonstrates that in an act of open rereading any structure contains its own destructuring (see "Steven's Rock and Criticism as Cure"). Everything depends on how one establishes the topographic nodes; one must be a good cartographer and hermeneutic critic.

How can this critical method be translated to a History of literary cultures? Clearly, the authors take from Miller the idea that literary history is a narrative open at both ends, opposed to the "organic narratives of national cultures." This theoretical choice, as Marcel Cornis-Pope and John Neubauer argue, is "very important in today's cultural climate, in which nationalistic and ethnocentric concepts of culture vie with globalist ones. Though seemingly opposed, both the globalist and the ethnocentric models "favor organicist narratives, unified either through the romantic notion of ethnic and linguistic purity or the Western trust in the global markets of late capitalism" (p. 34). The authors propose as remedy to the organicist disease of literary history the "rearticulation of the literary history of East-Central Europe through a translational approach that foregrounds both disjunctures and junctures" (p. 34), that is moments of rupture and continuity, crises and periods of relaxation, similarities and dissimilarities. The emphasis, according to the authors of the Introduction to Part I (each of the six parts is introduced by a substantial theoretical-practical orientation), falls on "the play of the specific regional features, without dissolving them into a melting pot." Organicism is refused on all levels.

How is, then, this immense material organized? Into a dialogue of significant temporal nodes (crises that lead to a change in the function of literature), of varying literary forms, of shifting topographies, of literary institutions and, finally, of spatial and temporal coordinates. The openness of this narrative at both ends allows the ordering of texts from present to past (as in a c.v.) and the other way round, like in a game with imaginary worlds in which literature is no longer a "second game," but a quadruple one.

I have noted the methodological-narrative freedom of the authors of different articles; from this point of view the History is postmodern feast, neither organicist, nor globalist, nor again ethnocentric, but rather a complex weaving whose nodes create changing perspectives. The cold cross-section and occasional inaccuracy of the information chills you; you feel as if betrayed by a computer program, which allows you to rediscover the maternal beauty of the traditional writing paper. Let me explain.

I was interested in the perspective of young Romanian critics on the Romanian literature of the Stalinistic period. I read with astonishment in Alexandru Ștefan's preamble that the "Romanian cultural elite viewed Antonescu's policies to a great extent with sympathy" (p. 113). It is untrue. Was Lovinescu an admirer of Antonescu? Or Mihail Sebastian? And many others? We need examples and names, otherwise we lapse into a notion of "Stalinism without boundaries." If the author is thinking of Mircea Eliade, a reference to Matei Călinescu's book on Eliade and Culianu would have been useful. I wanted to highlight this example because it spreads, through generalization, the virus of confusion. In a recent cultural history the blame was placed on first-rate intellectuals who had nothing to do with either Antonescu or the Iron Guard. One can err both through omission, and through addition and overgeneralization. Where does the present History mention the writers (non-sympathetic to Antonescu) who were thrown into prisons and could not publish until 1964? Of course, the two articles in this section offer useful information on the general features of "Romanian Stalinism," but a case study would have been necessary. The impression I get is of an accumulation of ideas and information from recent discussions in Romania (Letiția Guran, for example, does not mention Eugen Negrici, though his ideas are echoed here). The articles offer few personal opinions, few judgments of value that could have clarified, through a well-chosen detail, Romanian literary Stalinism. The instrumentalization of literary culture and socialist realism are present even in China. What is the distinguishing feature of the local nightmare?

In addition to these observations that concern the substance of this project, I would like to draw attention to another aspect: while no more than 1% of the mentioned (Romanian) novels are currently translated, in this first volume of the series which is 558 pages long, there are no more than two quotations from Romanian literature. We are condemning ourselves to marginality and this time it is not because of ethnocentrism. Moreover, the canon suggested in this History is different from the one assumed in Romanian literary history and criticism. I read with interest the article by Arent van Nieukerken, the "Ironic Moralism of Polish Poetry in the Twentieth Century" and I looked in vain for a corresponding article on Romanian poetry. Didn't the poetry of Ion Barbu and, more generally speaking, Romanian modernism deserve more? Ironically, at one of the page references given in the Index for Ion Barbu one can actually find Eugen Barbu (!) In addition, from the article of Endre Bojtar, "The Avangarde in the Literature of East-Central Europe" the name of Gellu Naum is inexplicably absent.

In spite of these objections, which may look like "nitpicking" at times, one needs to appreciate the scope of this encyclopedic project.

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