

New Historicism in Romanian Fiction

Maria MUREȘAN

University of Alba Iulia, Romania

E-mail: elimuresan@gmail.com

Abstract

Our research is an inquiry into the validity of a theoretically constructed framework for the study of literature which emerged at the threshold between the eighth and ninth decades of the last century: New Historicism. This inquiry implies both a theoretical and an applied dimension, that is, an assessment of the epistemological tenability of new historicist premises, assumptions and line of argument completed by the successful application of this grid on texts, in the sense of securing an interpretation which sounds appropriate and edifying. The necessity of this approach seems to us to arise out of the paradoxical situation that, although the masterpieces of Romanian fiction published after the war are in the magic realist or meta-historiographic key, the Romanian critics who used the New Historicist grid in their interpretation are just a few, and not the most authoritative figures in shaping the canon. The new historicism is neither popularization nor schematization, it is the new breath that will allow us to keep a minimum relationship of the people we are with the ideas that were.

Our paper brings up proofs in this argument, some of them originating in a theoretical discussion of the premises of New Historicism in the context of other critical schools, of the present exegesis of literary history, theory and criticism. Other arguments are provided by the epistemology of the age which carries the traces of the linguistic

turn, that is, the reversal of the relationship between language and referent. History is no longer conceived of as the non-problematic and truthful record of past events; it has been deconstructed as an act of language, a narrative following no other rules than the generic ones. We were also pleased to draw attention to valuable Romanian contributions to the research and discourse on this subject.

Keywords: *New Historicism*, counterfactual history, interdisciplinarity, historiography, metafiction

Our research is an inquiry into the validity of a theoretically constructed framework for the study of literature which emerged at the threshold between the eighth and ninth decades of the last century: New Historicism. This inquiry implies both a theoretical and an applied dimension, that is, an assessment of the epistemological tenability of new historicist premises, assumptions and line of argument completed by the successful application of this grid on texts, in the sense of securing an interpretation which sounds appropriate and edifying.

The necessity of this approach seems to us to arise out of the paradoxical situation that, although the masterpieces of Romanian fiction published after the war are in the magic realist or meta-historiographic key, the Romanian critics who used the New Historicist grid in their interpretation are just a few, and not the most authoritative figures in shaping the canon. Unlike pre-war criticism, characterized by a relative

uniformity of critical literary practice, such as the formalist school prevailing in the fourth and fifth decade, postwar criticism followed several tracks, the numerous schools sharing only the feature of interdisciplinarity.

Psychoanalytic, deconstructionist, feminist, materialist, etc. criticism was the outcome of a cross of literary studies and non-literary disciplines. The picture of the postwar schools of literary thought is, however, understood in different ways, the surveys listing them all but classifying them according to various taxonomic criteria. Before presenting our own view of the uses of New Historicism, we are going to take a critical look at two such taxonomies which can be set in polarity, illustrating the two divergent tendencies, that of reducing the new literary school that came into full bloom in the 1980s to the traditional historical approach, and that of forcing the implications of New Historicism as shaped by Michel Foucault, Louis Montrose, Stephen Greenblatt, Hillis Miller a.o. into a starburst of partial foci, such as studies of space, memory, trauma etc.: *An Introduction to Literary Studies* (2004) by Mario Klarer, and *Introducing Criticism at the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Julian Wolfreys, respectively.

Theoretical New Historicism has a fictional correlative, which Linda Hutcheon calls “historiographic metafiction”, and which we consider to be defining of major, canonical literary works of the later twentieth century. This term replaces that of “magical realism”, meaning an overlay of reality and imagination (actually, a superposition of these two contrary states), adding an essential element which is the metafictional or narrator plot: unlike the chronodiegesis, where the fictional universe is assumed to be real, the metanarrative is self-reflexive, giving the figural author (the author as figure in his book) the possibility to comment on his choices, on the character of the plot or characters etc.

Two theoretical contributions made by Romanian critics Dana Percec and Andreea Deciu

Ritivoi illustrate the local critical response to major signifying practices which carry the ‘magical realism’ tag, while actually being canonical examples of historiographical metafiction, as the self-reflexive element is present as well.

Niall Ferguson, a British historian specializing in economic history, whose prominent career included a position of Professor of History at Harvard University and Harvard Business School, Senior Research Fellow at Jesus College (Oxford University), Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institution (Stanford University) and Professor of History and International Relations at the London School of Economics, plays a game of probabilities, trying to guess what would have happened in the absence of certain factors intervening in the history we know. He is the author of a book entitled *Virtual History: Alternatives and Counterfactuals* published by Basic Books in 1997. His work is meant to answer questions he himself and a number of contributors to this collection of essays are pondering on: What if there had been no American Revolution? What if Germany had invaded Britain in May 1940? What if John F. Kennedy had lived? etc.

This time again we can find a correlative in Romanian fiction rather than theory.

Ovidiu Pecican, the author of *Lumea care n-a fost. O odisee în scrisori și documente moldovenești din prima parte a secolului al XVII-lea* (Polirom, 2018), endorses Ferguson’s negative view of the East, speculating on the impoverished national literature whose beginning was the letter of an ex-convict and informant. In this way he agrees with philosopher Emil Cioran who also looked upon his people as a second best one. In his insightful review of the book published in the *Steaua* Journal, Doru Pop discusses the novel as a hybrid of counterfactual history and historiographic metafiction.

This kind of rewriting ‘History’, however, is not necessarily counterfactual, as Pecican’s novel was erroneously described. The events rewritten

by the prose writer-historian are not discordant with the factuality of the past time, on the contrary. The author contradicts another commonplace of Mioritic anistorism, that of the fact that we are an eminently popular, or peasant, culture. Here we have a novel of the Romanian medieval urbanity (absent by the way), populated by educated people, who know how to write and read. Pecican explores an insignificant history, a level of the infra-historic, in an ideational approach to the new historicism. History does not speak to us (in capital letters), but small stories.

New Historicism is a critical theory which studies the mediation of language in our approach to the past. The past is not retrieved as what actually happened, it is reinvented by the historian who has limited access to documents which, in themselves, are only acts of language. The logic of real-life events (event A is sure to have triggered event B) is replaced with the logic of narrative structure: If history is a matter of narrativity, then counterfactual histories are nothing but the evolving of plots which work out hypotheses about the nature of society and the condition of man, dystopic predictions, parallel narrative trajectories launching speculations about possibilities rather than actualities in the world around us.

Ferguson launches into speculations operating with concepts which are not commonly employed by classical historiography, such as mental space, the agency of desire, the war of civilizations, etc.

As we have seen, Niall Ferguson alleges that a historian is actually producing a narrative, while Hayden White published a persuasive argument (*Tropics of Discourse*, 1978) supportive of the rhetorical relevance of historiography. Ovidiu Pecican, a distinguished Professor of History, affiliated with the Babeş-Bolyai University, and a writer who got several awards from literary societies has managed to fuse history and fiction into a type of discourse which a reviewer unambiguously associates with New Historicism. Pecican feels that one cannot get a full picture of a

community's historical experience without appealing also to that community's imaginative processing of its existence. His book on *Legends of Cluj (Clujul în legende*, 2010) is the fruit of such an attempt of bridging documented reality and fiction.

Ovidiu Pecican is a historian of the relativist school, who sees his discipline as being permanently in the making, depending on the discovery of other historical traces, as he says in the Introduction to his alternative history, *Lumea care n-a fost (The World that Never Was*, 2018). The statement is true in itself, but Pecican engages here in a playful, mock academic comment on the possibility of getting a more relevant picture of the past through insights into the private lives of the people who lived back then.

Pecican's textual trope for this emptiness at the heart of a text which is subject to many interpretations and rewriting (often of rewriting wrong) is the palimpsest. The texts sent down to us let us suspect the existence of others in the gaps among them –new ones might be discovered some day, and, besides, there is a layering of meanings attributed to them by successive generations. Being a professional in the field, Pecican reverses Ferguson's description of history as a narrative, rhetorically constructed. This time we are reading a novel written in the manner of a piece of historiography, with academic jargon and characteristic topoi (incomplete manuscripts, deteriorated manuscript, authored or anonymous, list of documents, author index, index of obsolete words, etc.)

New Historicism that emerged in the 80s of the last century, through the contribution of Stephen Greenblatt, the American critic who coined the name of the new school of critical theory and whose 1980 study, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*, introduces the defining operational concepts of the theoretical and applied approach proposed by the movement.

As John Brannigan observes, “it is a constant feature of new historian approaches to tend to study a considerable number of texts belonging to the same historical epoch and to postulate, or argue, that each epoch establishes its own way of manifesting itself: power” (Brannigan 2001: 174).

In terms of text analysis, critics of the new historian orientation aspire to identify the way in which literature influences and is influenced by the social, cultural and ideological context in which it fits, either by correlating several texts of different invoices belonging to the same era or by focusing on a particular literary work, most often considered exemplary in that culture.

Andreea Deciu Ritivoi, another Romanian contributor, explains in *Romania literară*, no. 6 from 2001 that *Practicing New Historicism* is a book born of the astonishment that sometimes causes success. The first studies signed by Stephen Greenblatt, then a professor at Berkeley, appeared in the late 1980s. The subject of those contributions: medieval, renaissance, Shakespearean texts, but especially contexts reconstructed with the acuity of the anthropologist but also with the receptivity of the writer to detail. Catherine Gallagher, co-author of this volume, has published studies on feminism. The new historicism has begun, if we are to give credence to Greenblatt and Gallagher's confession, more as a type of literary sensibility than as a rigorous method.

Andreea Deciu Ritivoi has been teaching literary theory since 2000 at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, USA. Her book, *Identity Nostalgia*, published in the absence of the author from the country, is, according to the author's own confession:

As naive or unlikely as it may seem to someone still young, I am one of those very attached to the past the energies of the present in order to be able to adapt in this way, I realized that an almost morbid mirage of

yesterday, of his time and elsewhere is constantly pulling me back. (Rea: 2014)

The author studies her suffering, says the literary critic in the same publication, in order to get rid of it or at least to keep it under control. First of all, it makes a history of the problem (because, from the perspective of a lucid man, nostalgia is also a problem that must be solved).

According to Andreea Deciu, in 1688, in Basel, Johannes Hofer de Mulhouse published a medical dissertation on homesickness, describing it as a disease of the imagination manifested by Swiss students studying abroad. [...] In 1720 another Swiss physician, Theodore Zwinger, proposed another hypothesis to explain nostalgia, which no longer invokes a disorder of the imagination, but rather of the associative mechanisms of memory. The former author is the one who invented the word nostalgia, combining two terms from the ancient Greek: nostos (return) and algia (pain).

Humorous (involuntary) is the opinion of a third Swiss physician, Jean Jacques Scheuchzer, who in 1719 hypothesized that the origin of the "disease" was the difference in atmospheric pressure between the mountainous areas where the students came from and the plain areas where they lived they were studying.

Andreea Deciu also analyzes the notion of identity in close connection with nostalgia, understood both from an existential perspective and from a narratological one. *Practicing New Historicism*, Andreea Deciu explains in *Romania literară*, no. 6 from 2001, is a book born of the astonishment that sometimes causes success. The first studies signed by Stephen Greenblatt, then a professor at Berkeley, appeared in the late 1980s. The subject of those contributions: medieval, renaissance, Shakespearean texts, but especially contexts reconstructed with the acuity of the anthropologist but also with the receptivity of the writer to detail. Catherine Gallagher, co-author of this volume, has published studies on feminism.

The new historicism has begun, if we are to give credence to Greenblatt and Gallagher's confession, more as a type of literary sensibility than as a rigorous method. As a way to ask questions, but in no case to propose answers". ("Practicing the New Historicism" in *Romania literară*, no. 6, 2001)

Professor Gallagher's overwhelming personality is evoked by Andreea Deciu in the pages of the same article mentioned:

The Romanian public had the opportunity to see and listen to Stephen Gallagher in the autumn of 1999, when he gave a lecture in the then too small building of the New Europe College, suffocatingly small for a large audience. But no huge building would have been really roomy for a character like Greenblatt. In the winter of 1997, I saw him in San Francisco, in an identical landscape, with people sitting directly on the floor, right in front of the speaker, huddled in the doorway, even though the host room was a huge ballroom in a large hotel. Greenblatt is a fascinating speaker, although his charisma is unusual for a speaker and his eloquence seems out of place in the context of oral communication: a gentle voice, almost weak, a calm figure but with such an accentuated expressiveness that every contour is clearly visible on his face of thoughts. Greenblatt speaks thoughtfully. You feel privileged to listen to him, as if you had entered directly into the inner universe of the speaker and witnessed the formation of his mental processes. And these mental processes are spectacular. (*Ibidem*)

In the author's opinion, these mental processes do not seem to be summarized or analyzed in the conventional sense of the term. "Practicing New Historicism", says Andreea Deciu, is the result of a bizarre effort: to show that the new historicism, categorically embodied by Greenblatt, rejects syntheses and analyzes alike. (*Ibidem*)

Originally, the New Historicism was the indulgence of American intellectuals disappointed by the rigidity of the New Criticism and both skeptical of Marxist ideology but especially disgusted with Marxist vocabulary (with its 'overproduction', 'base' and 'consumption'). The explanation offered by the author is that the New Historicism represents an effort to reconcile seemingly opposite tendencies, transcending the literary text and shifting the focus of analysis to the historical, cultural, social and political context, but immediately followed by a reading of the context as text.

This approach to literature is the result of a true disciplinary and methodological revelation, inspired by modern anthropology, and in particular by Clifford Geertz. In his famous 1973 volume, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Geertz discovered literary criticism as a method of investigating the wider cultural space, especially a cultural space foreign to the performer. In their turn, the representatives of the new historicism discover the cultural analysis as a method of investigation of the narrower literary space. The influence of Geertz-type anthropology on the new historicism results in what Greenblatt calls ethnographic realism, by which he understands the alliance between literary and non-literary, a solidarity of context with text. In anthropology there is an important concept, known as "thick description", and it refers to the interpretation of cultural practices through their detailed description, but also the description of a whole network of intentions, premises, and purposes included in those practices. The new historicism is inspired by the in-depth descriptions of anthropologists, preserving a permanent dialectic between text and context, literary and non-literary. Each of the terms of these oppositions in turn becomes an in-depth description of the other. The context also explains the text and vice versa, without being a simplistic-causal explanation.

The conclusion reached by the author in an attempt to explain the new history brings again to

the center of the issue the personality of Professor Greenblatt.

Greenblatt's or Gallagher's scrupulousness as a historian, sociologist, political scientist, and anthropologist remains, after all, the only guarantee of the validity of their method. But above the authors' erudition is that unique quality of their critical discourse, which I observed listening to Stephen Greenblatt in Bucharest and San Francisco: a huge force to generate empathy through a totally uninhibited textual majesty. The new historicism recognizes and celebrates, in fact, the talent, the vocation of literary critic. (*Ibidem*)

Andreea Deciu Ritivoi's book, *Intimate Strangers*, published by Columbia University Press, New York in 2014, mainly analyzes the perspective of the so-called 'foreigners', i.e. intellectuals of foreign origin, in American political discourse. The term used by the author in her book, 'foreigners', clearly refers to the immigrant status of several famous personalities in American society, such as Hannah Arendt, Herbert Marcuse, Alexander Solzhenitsyn and Edward Said.

The author describes how each of those mentioned above did nothing but outline the main directions in American political discourse in the aftermath of World War II. Arendt, Marcuse, Solzhenitsyn, and Said are considered the parents of true schools of thought in modern American culture. The status or quality of immigrant, 'foreigner', gives them the right to argue and think in a special way.

In their own attempt to persuade their audiences that they are "American enough," meaning that they can understand the new framework they are in, they have all used accurate rhetorical devices and sparked new policy approaches.

This approach breeds the theory of 'stranger ethos', which Andreea Deciu Ritivoi defines as the experience of a person who deliberately tries to alienate or alienate everything that is familiar to him, instead of accepting things naturally, so how they flow.

The author states in an academic lecture at the University of Pittsburgh that immigrants can teach us this without questioning, while politicians, teachers, parents and students should do, that is, think about these things. We all, says the author, can defamiliarize ourselves, by the simple fact of not accepting everything at once.

According to Deciu Ritivoi, immigrants teach us this because they practice it without thinking it, but politicians, teachers, parents and students should do it". Moreover, one can achieve defamiliarization through merely not accepting things for granted. A surprising aspect for Ritivoi was the fact that all these famous intellectuals were recognized by the entire academic community in their field of expertise, but their political views were often rejected for the simple fact that they were 'foreigners'. It was disturbing to find out that even educated people would reject a political view on the basis of their country of origin. That demonstrates how valuable the notion of 'native' can be and generates 'the myth of the native born'. In other words, just a native will truly know the needs of his country.

In an interview published by Columbia University Press, Andreea Deciu Ritivoi (2014) states that she is interested in foreigners who are intellectuals and who became interested and critical — however not dismissive — of American politics. Just as it happened in the case of Arendt, Marcuse, Solzhenitsyn and Said who all had a love-hate relationship with the American society; nevertheless, they wanted to make it better. One can notice a certain heroism in these writers as they were ready to take an enormous risk by bringing criticisms to their adoptive country.

Professor Vladimir Tismăneanu of the University of Maryland calls the book *Intimate*

Strangers a superb essay. According to him, this book represents not only a cornerstone in intellectual history but also a vibrant invitation to empathy, lucidity and moral clarity.

In conclusion, despite the huge success he still enjoys, this foreign ethos, 'stranger ethos' from Andreea Ritivoi's book, has alienated and alienates many readers, and many critics continue to marginalize these intellectuals, simply because they express points different views. On the other hand, however, the book does nothing but encourage readers to repress all that is xenophobia, and to support them in achieving the ideals of 'citizens' and 'non-citizens' alike.

The new historicism is neither popularization nor schematization, it is the new breath that will allow us to keep a minimum relationship of the people we are with the ideas that were.

Our paper brings up proofs in this argument, some of them originating in a theoretical discussion of the premises of New Historicism in the context of other critical schools, of the present exegesis of literary history, theory and criticism. Other arguments are provided by the epistemology of the age which carries the traces of the linguistic turn, that is, the reversal of the relationship between language and referent. History is no longer conceived of as the non-problematic and truthful record of past events; it has been deconstructed as an act of language, a narrative following no other rules than the generic ones. The purpose of our research was that of bringing in arguments supportive of a theorized and conceptualized approach to literature in the context of a growing distrust of theory and of talks about a crisis in the humanities. We were also pleased to draw attention to valuable Romanian contributions to the research and discourse on this subject.

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