Synchronism or Protochronism?:
Approaches to Modern Romanian Literature

The term "synchronism" was first used in Romanian theoretical writing—whether in a sociological, cultural or aesthetic context—by the interwar critic E. Lovinescu in his Istoria civilizatiei române (1937). Lovinescu's was a permanent struggle for the affirmation of modernity and he enjoyed regarding himself as a promoter, a champion of the Europeanization of Romanian society and culture. What Lovinescu understood by "synchronism," as applied to Romanian culture, was integration into the West European cultural system, adherence to the spirit of the age, to that "saeculum" which the same critic viewed as a homogenous reality governed by the standards of urban civilization.¹

When stating that such a transformation of a country—up to then belonging to a prevalingly rural and Eastern type of civilization—was possible only in a "revolutionary way," Lovinescu implicitly dismissed the evolutionary theses and located the sudden beginnings of the process he called "synchronization" back in the mid-nineteenth century, more specifically around the 1848 Revolution. Actually, attempts at synchronizing Romanian culture to Western standards had periodically been undertaken as far back as the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries by the chroniclers of that time whose "West" was represented by Poland and its post-Renaissance culture.

More recently the importance and amplitude of the contact between Romanian and Western culture during the Baroque age has been insistently emphasized. A number of scholarly studies and essays devoted to the Romanian Baroque in art and literature have conveyed an increasingly sharp sense of a Western tradition on the Romanian territory, a tradition of which the beginnings occur far before the late eighteenth or early nineteenth centuries. In a book dealing with the Baroque as a Mode of Existence, Edgar Papu, who views the Baroque much in the way it is regarded by E. D'Ors (that is not as an historically limited concept but as a recurrent phenomenon amounting to the

eternal hypostasis of the *Homo Barocchus*), states: "The progress of the Western spirit eastward and southeastward [during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries] anticipates the ulterior romantic moment. . . . Actually, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, on our territory, the artistic categories of the West were materialized in more expressive and more powerfully outlined forms than has usually been implied up to now."²

However it was the young Romanian offsprings of the upper, middle and lower nobility, the sons of the boiards who, in the first half of the nineteenth century were sent to pursue their studies in Paris and, at their homecoming were ironically called the "bonjourists," who marked that turning point in the development of Romanian cultural standards which Lovinescu chooses to view as the beginning of the "synchronization." According to him, although the Romanian bourgeois revolution was a political failure, its participants were victorious, because they put the mark of up-to-dateness on Romanian civilization, thus rousing against them the fury of the traditionalists, the *cfatãn*-and fur-cap wearers.³

The climax of that process which might have started in the seventeenth or eighteenth century or around 1848 and was a progress marked by ups and downs rather than an explosion, as Lovinescu liked to view it, can be located during the interwar years, when Romania produced a number of writers whose literary creation followed a course of development parallel to that of the most innovating trends in Western literature. More than the prose writers of those years, the Romanian poets experimented with the most advanced poetic formulae, thus placing themselves under the banner of the international avant-garde.⁴

"Synchronism" was by no means a figment of Lovinescu's impressionist imaginative criticism, but a substantive fact pertaining to the pattern of development of more than one East European country. Its consequences in Romanian literature have proved decisive for the physiognomy of that chapter in the history of Romanian literature, which, after all distinctions have been made and all chronological precautions have been taken, we may call Modern Romanian Literature. One of the most striking results of that process was the superposition of literary trends and currents which succeeded one another in Western and especially in the French and the Italian literatures, the main models available to Romanian culture in the first stage of Europeanization. Those

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