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**Literary Creativity Between  
Individual Innovation and Collective Norms.  
Tudor Vianu's *The Art of Romanian Prose Writers*  
in the Post-war History of Romanian Criticism**

**Abstract:** The study tries to assess a part of Tudor Vianu's scholarly influence in the history of post-war Romanian literary criticism, by tracing the circulation of concepts and evaluating the paradigm shift inspired by his 1941 book *The Art of Romanian Prose Writers*. Along this line of inquiry, two basic themes of literary criticism are discussed: on the one hand, the *singularity of literary creation*, an idea with deep roots and long-lasting consequences in Romanian criticism; on the other hand, the *collective aspect of creativity*, an idea inspired by literary theories of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which challenged the traditional beliefs about the originality of the artist.

**Keywords:** literary historiography, formalism, individuality, literary series, stylistics.

**Context of ideas**

One of the classic references of the Romanian school literary canon, *The Art of Romanian Prose Writers* remains to this date the most frequently quoted study written by Tudor Vianu. However, the reason of this prestige was mainly didactic, as the book was largely used for the many memorable paragraphs characterizing "the style" of canonic writers included in the Romanian school curricula. On the other hand, the book is not as clearly located within the history of Romanian criticism, because it had an offset reception, delayed from the ripe momentum of ideas, but also because many reviewers doubted it was

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a *critical* work proper. Obviously intrigued, G. Călinescu pointed out in a letter dated November 1945: "There is an ambiguity of concerns here, so that one is not sure where to locate your book". He went on by teaching the author of that "scientific book" how – on the contrary – "criticism is an independent genre, which, although requiring scientific preparation, separates itself from the strict investigation and, just like pure literature, reaches towards a living truth not an abstract one" (Vianu 1994, 280). A few decades later, the local critical *establishment* seemed to share the same view through the voice of Călinescu's main disciple Nicolae Manolescu: he expressed his dissatisfaction with Vianu's study, which he described as "a mix of empiric observation and scientific research" that "does not try to impose an original idea, but rather to forge an operating concept" (Manolescu 1983, 77).

The year 1941 was indeed inauspicious for the publication of Vianu's work, not only because of the historical context of the Second World War, but also because it was the very year Călinescu's great *History of Romanian Literature* appeared as well. Most of the contemporary reviews of Vianu's book revolved around a question of principle: can the author of this stylistic study be considered an actual literary critic? Or is he nothing more than a "university critic", aesthetician and "scientist" – however deserving in that respect? It is, of course, not the first time the Romanian letters host the debate "literary critic vs. university critic", stemming from the prejudice that an institutional difference reflects a difference of nature; the debate had been long fueled in inter-war literary reviews and it would not cease in the following decades. Nor is it the first time that Vianu falls under such discrimination, even more so as his prior critical studies like *Eminescu's Poetry* failed to achieve recognition from his peers. In spite of all these circumstances, one might have hoped for a more substantial discussion of Vianu's conception – and not only of his critical status – since his preface includes a methodological polemic worth being more closely examined.

In the preface, Tudor Vianu explains his project to trace the stylistic series of Romanian prose as an attempt to transgress both a certain praxis of literary history (namely – positivist literary history, which chose biographic explanation over "properly artistic" explanation), and a current praxis of criticism, based on "mediating emotions" and conceived as a "work of art grown on another work of art". The former argument is, however, rather ambiguous: Vianu refers to a type of literary history "established in the great works of the previous century" that was not so prestigious in Romanian criticism, except for the many studies dealing with Eminescu's biography or G. Bogdan-Duică's purely factual investigations. But since Vianu had himself some personal conflicts with the latter, one can infer his polemic had that more specific address.

However, the second polemical argument is more persuasive, as Vianu attacks the impressionist type of criticism. The Romanian stylistician is still not clear about whom exactly he is referring to and vaguely mentions the criticism "established towards the end of the previous century". But this time he expresses his opinions in a more asser-

tive manner and considers impressionist criticism as “secondary and dispensable”, “without personality”, working with “half-measures” and with a diminished image of the writer, whom “it assumes is not capable of feeling [emotions] by himself, but needs the critic’s help” (Vianu 1975, 11). Of course, the description above is right about many preconceptions and stereotypes circulating on the Romanian critical scene of the time; unfortunately, Tudor Vianu himself fuels, much to his own loss, the artificial distinction between academia and criticism, by opposing impressionist criticism the equally stereotypical principle of “science” and “exactness”. Moreover, he says too little about the form of that superior type of criticism: he only mentions in this respect the use of technical concepts (borrowed from stylistics), but otherwise relies on aphoristic assertions, such as: “The presence of irrational in the world (and the work of art is part of it) should not discourage the initiatives of reason” (Vianu 1975, 11). It’s true that, in his 1936 *Aesthetics*, Vianu discussed several arguments for considering the “morphological-stylistic criticism” as superior to “impressionism”, and now prefers to let the analyses speak for themselves. In fact, the theorist has meanwhile reached a more practical stage in his career, confessing that he felt he had to provide certain “applications to the ideas presented in *Aesthetics*” (Vianu 1990, 404). Still, Vianu’s polemic would have gained resonance had the author chosen to reformulate it extensively in the new context. But abbreviated as it was, the polemic seemed rather weak and only managed to challenge some vanities; for instance, in his review, Perpessicius seems to hardly contain his temper when he declares: “I don’t think (...) we need to waste our time preaching to the deaf. That unscientific, impressionist, temperamental criticism (...) has fully reached its purpose (...) by maintaining eternal remembrance of sacred authors (...) [and] could never be anything else than what the heavens meant it to be” (Vianu 1975, 629).

Undoubtedly, Tudor Vianu missed the mark of his address in the preface discussed. His strongest case should have been made not against criticism, but against literary history. After all, his own analyses could have provided the best argument for an innovative historiographic conception. In purely critical terms, Vianu’s stylistics is not radically different from the grounds of impressionism: following Spitzer’s example, it is a sort of “intuitive” analysis that resorts only *a posteriori* to formal arguments, but otherwise remains similar to traditional criticism in its focus upon the specific imaginary of an author. As a matter of fact, even Vianu’s most fervent disciple, Sorin Alexandrescu, would admit that despite using “different arguments than the impressionist critic, Tudor Vianu resorts to the same type of argumentation: his intuition and culture are the ones enabling him to evaluate and classify a given work or writer” (Vianu 1975, 665). Moreover, Vianu only seldom brings new interpretations, critic Perpessicius suggesting in this respect that “more than one observation” had already been made by Nicolae Iorga in his *History of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Literature*.

### The individual vs. the collective in literary history

What *The Art of Romanian Prose Writers* remarkably achieves instead is the way it views literary historicity as an arborescent development, and replaces the linear image of evolution with a dialectical one, based on the proportion of certain epic devices. More exactly, Vianu relies on a minimal set of prose elements, which can be deduced from the concrete analyses. Those elements are either rhetorical (the descriptive technique), or thematic (the social image) and generally reflect a traditional, even didactic, view about the configuration of literary prose. What is relevant, however, is the autonomous development of the respective elements, which does not always correspond to chronology: for example, two contemporary writers can show different levels of innovations, whereas others might seem to belong to a previous literary age; on the other hand, the development is not always continuous, since not all branches of the epic progress equally at the same time. Therefore, Vianu follows the progression of one epic element or another – such as the psychological analysis or the observation of reality. But, like the pieces of a puzzle, each of these elements takes a different shape with every different writer. As a consequence of that, Vianu's conception seems to recall the model of a bas-relief, where every character is at the same time individual figure and part of a larger group. The Romanian stylistician succeeds in finding a balance between *series* and *author*, between *typology* and *individual*. It is, of course, a very fragile balance, because Vianu emphasizes both poles of his analyses: on the one hand, he highlights the *collective aspect of creativity*, by placing every writer in a network of analogies; on the other hand, he insists on the *irreducibly individual aspect of creativity*, trying to underline the very personal configuration of every writer's epic universe. He tries perhaps too much in this latter respect, by using particularizing formulae like "there is no other writer who had..." or "seldom had other writer tried to...", but we can explain this high praise of the individual through the strong influence of psychologist doctrines in Vianu's years of formation. However, belief in creative singularity does not necessarily bring forth belief in an absolute originality. In fact, one of Vianu's greatest achievements is to suggest the dialectic between tradition and individual talent: after all, despite having a very specific stylistic mark, every prose writer can be placed in a certain filiation, no "artist" appears as a comet and out of the blue.

In conclusion, at the date of its publication, Vianu's *Art of Romanian Prose Writers* was innovative in its attempt to rethink the concept of literary history, albeit doing that on a confined area and narrow timespan (approximately one century of Romanian prose). Since it rejects almost any contextual references and tries to trace "the internal norm of the genre", Tudor Vianu's view comes very close to the famous theses of Russian Formalists concerning literary history – as close as it was possible, given the fact that the Romanian author had not read them directly. So even if Vianu himself refuses to be placed in this category, his *Art of Romanian Prose Writers* can be considered a literary history, since it explores national processes of literary evolution, within their

intrinsic logic, without any extrinsic determinations (not even related to Western stylistic currents).

### **Structuralism and the “author”**

But, as I have already pointed out, the book lacked a proper reception at its publication. Not only because the author did not make a strong case for himself in the preface, but especially because the Romanian critical environment of the time had different expectations: at the beginning of the 40s, the most prestigious Romanian critics were still largely impressionist, little interested in formalist approaches to literature and had an already formed, though conventional, opinion about Tudor Vianu himself (as the academic-who-is-not-a-literary-critic). Unfortunately, a quarter of a century would have to pass for the second edition of *The Art of Romanian Prose Writers* to appear in 1966. During this long interval, a part of the theoretical conception of the study had already become outdated. Interestingly enough, 1966 is also the year when new Structuralist criticism emerged in France, in the context of which an author-oriented stylistics – as was the case of Leo Spitzer or Tudor Vianu himself – is no longer theoretically relevant. However, as compared to 1941, there is in 1966 a different horizon of expectations in Romanian literary studies, which would resuscitate the reception of the book. An important school of Romanian stylistics had been evolving since the second half of the 50s, in close connection with the Communist-approved linguistic studies. After years of marginalization, Tudor Vianu himself had made a comeback as the academic leader of the new scientific movement. In the context of Socialist Realism, aesthetics had become a strongly ideologized discipline. Vianu's great work in that domain is thus largely overshadowed and he is now recognized primarily as a stylistician. However, this brings him more public prestige than before, because many young Romanian literati were attracted by stylistic and linguistic studies, in which they saw an alternative to the ideological discourse.

Indeed, Toma Pavel, the future great American theorist of fictional discourse and one of the most promising Romanian stylisticians of the time, considers, in his review of the second edition of *The Art of the Romanian Prose Writers*, that the study is “perfectly relevant to this day”. Despite the theoretical gap between the stylistics of the 40s and the structuralism of the 60s, Pavel is able to acknowledge Vianu as a predecessor. In fact, the young critic can comprehend Vianu's goals better than his own contemporaries, pointing out “the evolution of Romanian prose not from the «authors' perspective», but from the perspective of stylistic devices. (...) In reality, this point of view has been too long neglected and considered secondary to the actual history of literature” (Pavel 1967, 13). Sorin Alexandrescu is also eager to praise “the general method” used in *The Art*, regarding the larger artistic series, and considers the volume to be “to this day, the most important achievement of the entire Romanian stylistics” (Alexandrescu 1967, 419).

We can observe that Vianu's theoretical implications could be fully grasped only when placed against a new theoretical context, different from that of the Romanian criticism of the 40s. The young Romanian stylisticians and poeticsians of the 60s are largely influenced by contemporary Structuralism, and are thus better suited to resonate with the typological, systematic attempts made in *The Art*. Vianu's perspective and the perspective of the new "scientific" criticism share several elements: emphasis on textual composition, rejection of context and fact-oriented approaches, use of linguistic elements in literary criticism. But although right in some of its assumptions, the second reception of the book also exaggerates some of Vianu's contributions. For instance, the author is believed to have had "narratology" (Călinescu 1978, 68; Oancea 1988, 266) intuitions, which is a far-fetched assumption, since Vianu had no clear-cut concept of the "narrative perspective", but rather relied on an old-fashioned confusion between "author" and "narrator". However, during the 60s and the 70s, many Romanian literary critics and researchers would try to forge a "science of literature", in the hope of transcending the impressionist paradigm, and needed a legitimizing predecessor. Tudor Vianu seemed the right personality to fulfill this role, even more so as his academic presence was still fresh in the minds of his young disciples (he died in 1964). This is why *The Art* would largely be acknowledged as a path-blazing study. But, besides being conventionally praised, was it also effectively influential in terms of critical ideas?

One can hardly give a clear answer to this question, especially since the number of quotations does not always reflect the quality of the influence. After being baptized in the spirit of new literary theories, Vianu's book entered the academic circuit and, thus, became a common reference in Romanian literary criticism. It was then only natural that each new study about a Romanian prose writer should refer, more or less extensively, to the 1941 study. Nevertheless, Vianu's "contribution" in analyzing a certain writer would especially stand out in cases of critics with stronger methodological preoccupations. A good such example is Al. Călinescu's essay *Caragiale or the Modern Age of Literature* (1976). Inspired by Russian Formalism and French Narratology, the Romanian critic tries to prove Caragiale's advanced narrative conscience and his modern view about the process of creation. Călinescu illustrates his opinion by pointing out the several "stylistic variations" Caragiale used to try, besides literature proper, in his journal articles. The same remarks about Caragiale's "conscious attitude" and about his interest in fixed types of discourse had already been made by Tudor Vianu, though without much emphasis. Al. Călinescu takes the argument to the extreme and considers the Romanian writer "our very first theorist in poetics" (Călinescu 1976, 12), a writer who approached the problem of literary composition in the exact same manner modern literary theory would later do. Marin Mincu makes an equally far-fetched hypothesis regarding Ion Creangă's *Memories*, where the critic sees nothing more, nothing less than the illustration of "language as free significant, no longer communicating an experience of life but the very experience of communication" (Mincu 1993, 114). This time also, the critic cites Tudor Vianu, for "being one of the first to infer Ion Creangă's

use of poetic devices" (Mincu 1993, 110). Actually, Vianu only vaguely spoke about the Romanian writer's "musicality", but was in fact far from Mincu's assumption made in the spirit of semiotics. Both Al. Călinescu and M. Mincu apply hard theoretical hypotheses to texts that cannot always contain them. Their new interpretations are hence triggered by their theoretical readings, not directly inspired by Tudor Vianu; nonetheless, we can observe how *The Art of Romanian Prose Writers* is upgraded by the new theoretical horizon of Romanian criticism.

Finally, a more discrete, but still argumentatively relevant reference can be noted in Nicolae Manolescu's exceptional essay *Sadoveanu or the Utopia of the Book* (1976). The critic manages here to effect an actual reform in Sadoveanu's exegesis, which had previously been mined by his reading in the spirit of Realist Socialism. Manolescu highlights instead the bookish and stylized dimension of the Romanian writer's novels, the way in which his narratives replace the code of Realism by a purely linguistic and highly conventionalized diegetic code. The critic admits that Tudor Vianu had also noticed a similar evolution in Sadoveanu's works, by pointing out "the method of relating from the angle of a cultivated narrator", as well as the "phase of intellectualization and stylization" (Vianu 1975, 199-201). With Manolescu, this remains however a singular analytical coincidence; as a matter of fact, his great study about the development of the novel (*Noah's Ark*) is by no means indebted to Vianu's *Art*, although both are conceived as "intrinsic histories" of a literary genre. In addition to that, Nicolae Manolescu never seemed to hold Tudor Vianu in high regard, often suggesting his discontent with the theorist's impersonal style of discourse. Therefore, it was rather surprising to see the late praise Manolescu expressed for Vianu in a 1999 article from journal *Literary Romania*. Here, Manolescu strangely wonders why the view of "literature as a fact of language" has had "so little impact" on Romanian criticism. The critic sees no difference whatsoever between inter-war and post-war criticism and considers that both "neglected the problem of language", an actual "original sin" of the entire Romanian criticism, from its very beginnings with Titu Maiorescu. Instead, Manolescu chooses to highlight *The Art of the Romanian Prose Writers*, as "the single [Romanian] example of applied stylistics" (Manolescu 1999). Thus, to an almost 180-degree turn from the way it was received in 1941, Vianu's study is now perceived precisely as a critical achievement. It remains strange, however, that Nicolae Manolescu never took into consideration the historiographic value of Vianu's book, especially since he often showed interest in the history of literary forms. Of course, not only Manolescu, but many other post-war Romanian critics as well, still considered G. Călinescu's model of literary history as the greatest and unsurpassable instance of the genre.

### **A history of absolute beginners**

Besides the theoretical and interpretive filiations we discussed above, the most significant continuity of the historiographic project outlined in *The Art of Romanian Prose Writers* was attempted in Mihai Zamfir's studies, even more so as they should

have been crowned by his 2011 *Short History* (of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Romanian literature) – meant as the counterpart of the 1941 study. Zamfir acknowledges the fact that “following Tudor Vianu, I tried to conceive a «diachronic stylistics», which would realize at least a part of the Russian Formalists’ dream – namely a history of literature dealing with the evolution of stylistic series rather than with the chronological evolution of particular writers and of their works” (Zamfir 2012). Mihai Zamfir’s syntheses of literary history are indeed constructed from the immanent perspective of stylistics and thus reject causal/circumstantial explanations, replacing the author-oriented approach with a form or genre-oriented approach.

As already mentioned, Tudor Vianu also took in his *Art of Romanian Prose Writers* a polemical stance against the excessive use of historical facts in interpretation. Mihai Zamfir renews the idea with an insistence that brings him close to an actual anti-historicism. It is an attitude obviously triggered by the theoretical readings of the critic, but without much support in the practical reality of Romanian literary studies (which were never dominated by fact-oriented approaches). Therefore, Zamfir’s assertions that “contextual study” is “secondary” in literary history were understandable given the vogue of Structuralism in the 70s. However, they would later seem less necessary when, in the context of *New Historicist* doctrines of the 80s, the Romanian critic would still feel the need to criticize historicism, declare its “undoubted failure” (Zamfir 1985, 19) and ask for the rejection of “biographic documents, external influences or other types of archives” (Zamfir 1985, 282).

On the other hand, the transgression of Vianu’s legacy by Mihai Zamfir could be more closely examined in terms of the latter’s attempt to move beyond an author-oriented towards a literary form-oriented stylistics. The critic had first tried to do that in his 1971 debut volume, by drafting the pattern of the „prose poem”. Later, his 1972 study about Al. Macedonski would also try to reform the classic perspective of the monograph, as Zamfir analyzed the Romanian poet’s texts in relation to the literary language of the age, to local and European poetic norms. Zamfir challenged the traditional image of the organic poetic unity and analyzed instead two very distinct variants of the same poet, according to the internal configuration of his work. In a similar manner, Mihai Zamfir’s essay about Proust (1976) would avoid to interpret the author *per se*, but try instead to reveal the structural core of his novel and the place it occupied in a network of narrative forms. However, the Zamfir’s stylistic conception has meanwhile evolved in a direction contrary to his prior formalist principles, leaving way for an interpretive habit that turned gradually into a trap. More exactly, the literary historian became more and more tempted to see *the exception* instead of *the rule*. For Mihai Zamfir, the emergence or evolution of a certain literary form is ultimately determined by the writer’s personality, by the great authors who can “feel the forms”. As a consequence of that, the critic is no longer able to find unity within variety, as his stylistic project had promised to do; instead, he splits the “unity” in several types of “uniqueness”. His studies from *The Other Side of Prose* (1988) come very close, in this sense, to

the psychology of creation, as Zamfir searches for the particular reading key, different for every writer.

This tendency becomes even more obvious in Mihai Zamfir's 2011 synthesis *Short History. The Alternative Panorama of Romanian Literature*. It is, in fact, a history of singularities, where almost any author stands out of the line one way or another, while lines themselves can hardly be grasped, a history of absolute beginners, where every new writer heralds a new tendency or a new formula, and distinguishes himself radically from both his predecessors and followers. The frequent terms of radical difference – such as “unpredictable, impossible to explain, unusual, strange in the context, striking, atypical”, “miracle, exception”, “seldom, rarely” – all seem to signal Zamfir sees atypicality as *the* norm in literary history. In contradiction to the rationalist principles of the formal stylistics he assumed, the critic comes close to suggesting the ineffable, indefinable nature of literarity: “After removing all [formal] strata (...) we find the irreducible stylistic core, *the fifth essence*” (Zamfir 2012). In conclusion, the emphasis on creative singularity is even stronger with Mihai Zamfir than it was with Tudor Vianu, a fact with positive consequences for criticism (which concerns individual objects), but negative consequences for literary history (which should concern collective aspects).

The very recent example of Mihai Zamfir proves the long-lasting impact Vianu's *Art of Romanian Prose Writers* had in our literary criticism. The book had a delayed reception and was first met with several objections, but later developments in literary theory would enable its resuscitation, a couple of decades after its publication. Current, younger Romanian critics, educated in the spirit of cultural studies, no longer resonate with the theoretical setting of Vianu's book, based on individual stylistics and certain formalist elements. However, when looking back to the post-war history of Romanian criticism, any researcher should acknowledge the fact that Vianu's scholarly legacy was comparable in its extension to the influence of G. Călinescu, commonly regarded as our most influential literary critic. The fertility of Vianu's *Art of Romanian Prose Writers* would make a strong case in this respect.

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